

The Light We've Made by kittenCorrosion

Series: [The Light You Make \(AU\) \[2\]](#)

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Summary:

It's been six years since El first went on a blind (not) date with her best friend's boyfriend's tall, nerdy roommate. Four years since they said "I do". Everything is good and easy, even when it's not, and El is comfortable with her husband and their life.

But then she has to face a complication that she never imagined and for once... Mike isn't on her side. Can they overcome her fear together, or will everything they've built fall apart?

1. If we don't make it I will fall apart

Notes for the Chapter:

i literally never planned to write a sequel. at all. then two weeks ago the idea came to me and i was like... oh my god i have to write this. so i did and it's kind of depressing at times and also gonna be happy because mike and el should always be happy. fact.

um... yeah, if you've read the first one you kind of know what to expect. i hope you like it.

Eleven Theresa Wheeler stared at the small, oblong piece of plastic resting in the middle of her palm.

She had been staring at it so long the sun had vanished, leaving her sitting in the dark on the floor of the living room, the rough carpet digging into her bare legs. They'd been trying to renovate the small house, painting and putting in new appliances, but they were both so busy that the living room was still in need of an update and the carpet was a brown shag that was so thin in places you could feel the wood beneath.

The door creaked open, the usual squeaky hinge alerting El to her husband's return from work. His job at the university often kept him in his office later than her own, helping students with their lab reports or rechecking his research for his thesis, and he'd come home clutching takeout if he knew they wouldn't have time to make dinner.

Like tonight, he was clutching a greasy bag of burgers and fries, a smell that would have tempted her if her stomach hadn't been twisted into a painful knot of anxiety.

How am I going to tell him?

Mike squinted into the darkness, flipping on the light in the hallway and immediately tensing when he saw her, curled up on the floor, her eyes huge and full of fear.

"El, babe," his arms were around her in an instant, kneeling next to her on the floor. "What happened? Is it bad? Do you want to talk about it?"

"I—"

"Should I get you in some pajamas? I think those soft ones you like are still in the washing machine but I can—"

"Mike."

Her voice was quiet but he immediately shut up, not noticing the object her hands were clenching onto, only seeing the panic and fear that made her sit on the floor for hours, waiting for him to come back. They had been married for four years now, long enough that he knew the routine and what he needed to do to help her when she had a depressive episode or a panic attack. He had carried her to their bed countless times, holding her as she cried and kissing her over and over, telling her not to believe the lies her mind tried to convince her were real.

But now it wasn't an episode or attack. Sort of. She was immediately nervous and anxious, but the inability to move was more shock than anything. Her brain hadn't quite accepted the truth she was holding in her hand but somehow she knew she needed to tell him. To find out if he would be upset. And then to figure out the next step.

"El?" His eyes searched hers. "What is it?"

"I... we..." the panic made her gasp and she had to take a deep breath. "I need to tell you something."

"Anything, babe. What is it? Did something happen at work? Was it another abuse case, I know those are rough. Do you want me to make some waffles?"

He was asking too many questions, trying so hard to understand what was wrong so he could try and find a solution. She frowned irritably.

"No, but I..." she took a deep breath. "Mike, um, we... did something. Something big."

“Something... big?” His brow crinkled and despite her panic she felt the familiar urge to kiss the line between his eyebrows. “Okay, what did we do?”

“It’s, um, I mean—”

“Jeez, El, did we mess up the mortgage or something? You’re making me nervous.”

Her mouth was hanging open, trying to get the words out, and he stared down at her, his ridiculous height still making him taller than her even when they were both kneeling. His eyes were warm and concerned and she reminded herself that he was Mike. The same Mike who had saved her from shitty adopted dad, the one who had given her a second chance, the one who had loved her even when she hadn’t deserved it.

Her Mike. Her husband. Her soulmate. Her love.

She exhaled, licking her lips, letting the words spill out.

“I’m pregnant, Mike.”

The words hung heavy in the air and the second they left her mouth, she felt the tide of panic rise again. He was quiet, his eyes getting bigger and bigger by the second, and the tide crashed over her like a choking wave. The tears overflowed and her entire body shook as a sob bubbled out of her chest.

“I’m so *sorry*,” she hiccuped. “I don’t know how—”

He held his hand up to quiet her, still too stunned to speak, and she felt her heart fall out of her chest and onto the rough carpet. His face was unreadable but she could tell that everything was wrong, that it wasn’t okay. He was upset.

“El, I mean...” he sounded choked. “Are you *sure*?”

She held up the pregnancy test, unwrapping her fingers and showing the tiny plus sign that had sealed their fate. His eyes somehow got bigger, his hands awkwardly fluttering as he reached for it, and he stared at it before looking up at her.

“D-Did you—Are you sure it’s right? That it’s not just a... false alarm?”

“It’s the fifth one,” she whispered, voice shaking. “The others are in the bathroom. All positive.”

“How long since—”

“I don’t *know*,” she almost sobbed, “a month or two maybe? I was feeling tired and I thought I was just sick.” She shook her head, unsure of how she was being so calm, holding in just how terrified she was so she could explain. “Remember, I thought I had the flu two weeks ago? And I saw the doctor and he didn’t test me because I told him it wasn’t possible—I’ve been on birth control for *years*—but then today I realized I haven’t had my period in forever and....” her voice trembled, thick with tears. “I’m *pregnant*, Mike.”

She said the word again, the one that made her want to curl up and die. Her hand brushed against her stomach automatically and she shuddered, unsure of how to feel at the thought of another being existing there. He was still holding the pregnancy test but he let it fall to the ground, his arms reaching.

“El,” his voice was choked and he crushed her against his chest, pressing kisses to her forehead. “El, oh my god.”

It wasn’t the reaction she had expected and she almost flinched away, unsure of how to react. He wasn’t... angry? In fact... he almost sounded excited? She couldn’t tell, clinging to him and trying to ask, needing to know if he was upset.

“Mike—”

“We could turn the spare bedroom into the nursery,” his voice was muffled against her hair. “I mean, I know it’s soon maybe we could get a minivan and sell Gandalf? Even though Subarus have good safety rates. At least the house is almost paid off and we have a yard and a—”

“Mike!” she exclaimed.

His eyes were shining when he pulled back to look at her and she felt

her heart sinking. He *was* happy. Excited. Planning for the thing that was already growing in her, the thing that would change both of their lives forever. She had expected anger or outrage or maybe even just resigned annoyance. But he... he wanted it?

"We're not—Mike, I can't," she was shaking her head. "I can't have a baby, I told you this before, I can't be a mom. I don't know how and I can't do it. I'm not ready. *We're* not ready." Her voice pitched up, borderline hysterical. "I can't do it, I kn-know I c-can't, Mike, I don't want to, *please* don't make me have a baby."

The tears were pouring down her face and dripping onto her bare legs as she shrunk in on herself, her arms crossed across her abdomen, her entire body shaking as she tried to make herself smaller, wanting to wink out of existence and not have to face it.

His smile fell off his face.

"You... don't want it?" he asked, confused.

He didn't move away but she could feel him shifting, could see in his eyes how he was suddenly a millions miles away from what she was feeling. The hand that had been holding hers slackened.

"I *can't*, Mike," her eyes tried to find his, tried to make him understand. "You know I can't. Please, I can't do this."

"But... but it's ours, El. We made it together, even if it was an accident... we can learn together," his brow pinched in confusion, his face full of sudden hurt and disbelief. "You'll be okay, you'll be a good mom."

He said it too easily, as if she hadn't spent countless hours agonizing over the very thought of bringing a life into the world. As if he knew better. As if her mind should have suddenly changed and gone into some maternal mode now that she was telling him she was pregnant.

His arms to went slack and fell to his sides.

"No, I can't. *Please*, you know me, Mike." Her face was desperate, trying to make him remember the conversations they'd had. How she was afraid, how she didn't believe she was capable of being a good

enough mother. Her voice dropped to a whisper, a plea. “Don’t make me do this.”

She reached for him, desperate for the reassuring touch he’d always offered, but for the first time since they’d kissed on the rooftop and found forgiveness... he pulled away. Her hands met empty air and dread filled her, the kind of dread you feel when you miss a step on a staircase and think you’re going to fall. When there’s something *missing*.

“Mike?”

He was standing, facing the hall that lead to their bedroom, his hand pressed against the soft blue wall, as if he needed the support. Her voice sounded small but he didn’t look back at her, his shoulders tense.

“Mike, I’m sorry but—”

He whipped around. “You don’t *want* it?! You want to just... get rid of it? Like it’s nothing? Like it isn’t part of *us*?”

El stared at the outrage on his face, completely stunned. They had *talked* about this. She had told him she didn’t want to have kids and he had accepted that. Why were things suddenly different now? What had changed?

Her chin trembled but she found the strength to stand, pushing herself up off the floor. Her legs shook, stiff from being still for so long, and his hands twitched out towards her, like he was ready to catch her if she fell despite his anger.

But she didn’t.

“I *never* wanted this.” Her voice was trembling but firm. “I told you that. Before we... before you married me. I told you I couldn’t have kids. That I didn’t have that in me. That being a mom wasn’t something I could do.”

“But—”

“You told me it was okay. That all you wanted was *me*,” her voice

broke. "Did you change your mind? Am I not enough anymore?"

He saw the fear in her eyes, and he sighed, shaking his head, one of his ebony waves falling and shadowing his face.

"No, El, of course not. I love you," his voice softened and he stepped towards her, reaching like she'd reached for him. "I'm always going to love you. I promised that." His hand found hers, his thumb rubbing across the pearl that adorned her finger. "I love you more than anything in this entire world and nothing can change that, okay? It's not about that." He exhaled heavily. "But I have enough love for you and whoever you have inside of you too. Are you really going to be mad at me for wanting that?"

She was staring up at him, seeing the truth and honesty in his eyes. He was her endless hot spring of love, keeping her warm through dark winters and cold summers, thawing out her frozen heart and never letting her forget. It was love she couldn't match and didn't deserve but she returned as much as she as possible and that had always been enough.

There wasn't a fear of him choosing to love a child more than her, of losing part of him to fatherhood. If there was anything he would be amazing at, it would be loving even *more*. His generous heart wanted that, to love as much as possible. She understood why he wanted the unspoken possibility that now lived inside of her. It made sense. But that didn't mean she could make herself want it too.

"I'm not mad at you," she said softly. "I'm not afraid of you losing you... I'm afraid of... of hurting someone else. Something that didn't ask to exist or get to choose who their mom would be. Of what I would do if I fucked up something so... *innocent*."

She wasn't made of love like he was. Her friends dwelled in her heart, her sister, and her husband. His family had crammed themselves in there too, and her own found family, crowding the small space until it was almost bursting. She wasn't like him, an ever open supply of love. She only had so much to give.

"You think you'd hurt it?" He frowned.

"I... don't you remember, Mike? How long it took for me to love you? What I did to you before I let you in and admitted it? How I *hurt* you?" She felt herself panicking again. "I can't do that to a *child*. Something so small a-and innocent... I can't let myself anywhere near one, where I could make it think it isn't worth being loved. *I can't do it.*"

Her voice squawked out of her and Mike winced, hearing just how desperate she was. The fear seemed so valid, so earth-shakingly real, but he didn't nod and agree, didn't try and pretend like he understood.

It occurred to her that she hadn't imagined this ever happening. Her anxiety had plotted out every future possibility for her to obsess and worry about, and while she had thought heavily about the complications a child would bring to their relationship, she hadn't considered any of it *actually happening*. She had just assumed he would support her in this decision too, that it was one of things she would get to love about him but never worry about... and she was stunned to realize she was wrong.

He still wanted it.

"El, look—"

"No. No, don't do that. Don't try and make me understand because I can't, Mike. I told you there were things I wanted to try and get better at, be less afraid of. But this..." Her eyes squeezed shut and she trembled again. "This is too much. I can't I-I c-can't I can't p-please, I would rather *d-die*."

Her words echoed and he stared at her with wide eyes again. She wasn't trying to hurt him or scare him, it was just how she felt. The thought of her stomach bulging out, of holding the tiny, squirmy thing, of having something so small and innocent and perfect look up at her with trusting eyes... it made her want to go back to the rooftop and let herself fall.

She couldn't do it.

"You really don't want to even... think about it? To try?" he was

incredulous, eyes pleading.

"I *can't*, Mike," she almost whined, trying to make him hear her. "Don't you understand?"

"You're saying you can't but you won't even—"

He cut himself off and looked away bitterly, letting go of her hands, his arms dropping back to his sides. The panic flooded her lungs again as the acceptance and trust he'd always offered her no matter what suddenly vanished.

"You want to just... kill it? Before it's even had a chance?"

"No, I—" Yes. "I just... I don't know, Mike. I just know I can't do this. I can't have this thing in me, I-I'll hurt it on accident or—"

"This *thing*?! God, El, you can't even call it what it is? You can't call it our *child*?!" He snapped, shaking his head and walking away a few steps, like he wanted to start pacing. "I know we agreed that kids weren't going to be our thing, I know I promised I wouldn't make you choose but..." his voice was strained. "What about me? Why don't *I* get to choose?"

There were tears of frustration in his eyes as he stared at her and she felt herself shrinking smaller and smaller. She had assumed he would be upset at her, that she hadn't been careful enough, that they'd made a mistake that would be expensive and messy to fix. Another secret to keep from his family. But she hadn't expected his *anger*... his frustration that she didn't want to change her mind now that circumstances had changed.

Nausea bubbled in her stomach as she saw that he was frustrated with *her*. It was her fault.

"I-I'm s-sorry," she whispered, the only answer she had to offer.

"I did want to be a dad," he admitted, the bitter tone back. "But I gave that up to be with you because I love you more than I... more than I want things. You mean more to me than that and I thought if I had you I would never need anything else. And I don't *need* anything else but..." he gestured to her stomach, eyes gentle. "It's right there,

El. It's less than a year away from being something *real*, something you can hold in your arms. Something wonderful and amazing and miraculous... something that's part of both of us. Another part of you I would get to love. Don't you want that? Don't you want more of me?"

He looked conflicted and hurt and something else, his breath panting out of him as he tried to make her understand. But he was the one who didn't understand.

"Mike, you know if I could, I would," she whispered softly. "But I don't have that much in me. You already have everything inside of me, every part of me is *yours*. And this..." her hand rested there, heavy over her shirt. "This will just make that impossible. I won't take away what I promised you and give it to someone else. Not even... not even this."

"So that's it, then?" His voice was sharp. "You don't even want to think about it, you just want to rip it out and throw it away? Like it doesn't matter?"

"I..." she trembled again. "I don't *want* to... but what other option is there? We can't afford—"

"*Don't*. Don't lie to me!" His face was red. "You know we have enough savings to afford a kid, and once my doctorate goes through my salary will raise and—"

"And what, you'll leave me here? Want me to quit my job so I can stay at home all day and be your perfect little housewife? Cleaning and cooking and taking care of the baby?" She had spat the words but her voice trembled, giving her away as she broke down again. "*Alone?*"

"No, I mean—" he looked surprised.

"I want to keep helping people, I want to keep doing something meaningful. I can't give up what I love to do because of... of a mistake," she gulped.

She had an array of clients, mostly adolescents struggling with self-

image and depression. They were mirrors, tiny self-portraits of the person she'd been, only now she was able to help them see the truth *before* they reached the points she had. She was a protector, helping to keep them from hurting themselves, unlike the people she'd talked to when she was their age.

Those were the children that needed her. But this one? This one just seemed... optional. A choice she'd never wanted to make. Something she didn't *want*. Something she just wanted to make it disappear instead of think about it.

"Okay, you don't have to quit, El, we can think of something—"

"I don't want to *think!*" she shrieked, suddenly breathless. "I want it *gone!*"

Mike stared at her, and his jaw tightened. His fists clenched and unclenched and she realized he he was angry... no, he was *pissed*. He moved, almost in slow motion, snatching his keys off the table and heading for the front door.

El felt all the breath leave her lungs.

"Mike, wait, I'm sorry—"

"No, don't. I need to think, okay?"

His hand was on the doorknob and he didn't turn to look at her, his entire body tense with anger. She wanted to walk to him, to reach out and try and make him understand. But she felt frozen, completely paralyzed, watching as he opened the door and stepped out, a strangled sob leaving her throat as the person that meant more to anything in the entire world... left her.

"*Mike,*" she sobbed, eyes clouding with tears.

"I can't be here right now." *Here with you.* "I need to think. I'll... I'll come back, okay? I promise."

She blinked and the door was shut, an empty space where he had stood. He had left. Left her there to deal with the fear in her mind and the doubt in her belly... alone. She was alone and her legs gave

out, her entire body crumpling against the rough carpet, arms clinging to nothing as she sobbed. All the emotions that had been swirling inside of her since she'd first stared at the positive pregnancy test were pouring out of her. Fear, disbelief, anger, hurt. She had waited, trying to keep them in until Mike was there to help anchor her, like he always did.

But he had left and she was alone and the pitch black despair clouded over as she sobbed.

Alone.

Notes for the Chapter:

again: this isn't trying to be some political statement so if you wanna spew your opinion about abortion literally don't i'll just delete it lol. i don't have time for that debate right now.

the chapters for this one are going to be shorter because... it's a shorter story. ten chapters tops but i'm thinking it'll be less than that. i'm still writing but i know how it ends and i have all of it planned so i just have to sit down and do it. i'll try and update fairly frequently.

anywhoo yeah this chapter hurts. but i think it was kind of expected. ;)

lemme know what you think! i always crave compliments and validation so i can know you want more otherwise i'm never sure. kudos are great too. i love all of that. and i love you guys too.

-g

2. Let you go and let the lonely in

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm trying to not update too fast but i'm gonna be busy the next few days cause of christmas and family so i'm updating earlier than i planned. my little nine year old cousin is visiting and he's great but also he won't leave me alone and i've been struggling to find time to write so aAAAAAH.

god i'm terrible with kids jesus christ help

i'm so glad so many of you are liking this so far, even though that first chapter was depressing af lol. i wasn't sure if a sequel was a good idea but idk it just feels like them and i'm glad ya'll like it too.

it's gonna be a bumpy ride!

“Ellie?”

The door creaked open again, but El didn't move. She hadn't moved since the door had shut and Mike vanished. It felt like hours, but in truth it had been about forty-five minutes since he'd left.

Thirty-five minutes since Mike had appeared at the Henderson's house and Dustin had sat him down in the man cave with a glass of whiskey and let him spill his problems. Twenty-five minutes since Dustin had reappeared and refilled the glass, murmuring to his wife that her best friend needed her. Seven minutes since Max left her house and raced across town to the Wheeler residence holding a bag full of movies and chocolates and a bottle of wine.

“M-Maxie?”

It was a whisper and then the lights were on and Max was there, lifting her up like she used to for so many years, her muscles still strong enough to carry her small friend. The couch was the goal and Max stretched El across it, wrapping her in a blanket and then sitting

down next to her and holding her.

“Max,” El whispered. “I fucked up.”

“How?”

“I’m pregnant.”

El felt her friend tense against her, then let out a heavy sigh. Max was smart enough to put together the dots of what that meant and why exactly Mike had ended up at their house getting drunk. Overreacting wasn’t going to help so instead she tried to make herself relax again.

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow.”

It was quiet, the two sitting in companionable silence, since there wasn’t really a need for an explanation. Then El shuddered and the tears came, the fear and hurt at Mike’s sudden departure, the panic and uncertainty of the future, everything feeling like it was too much to handle. Max held her closer, rubbing her back and letting the tears fall. When she had quieted, she finally spoke.

“So... what are you going to do?”

“I don’t want it, Max. You know I never wanted kids. I barely can take care of myself... I can’t ruin an innocent *kid*.”

“What does Mike want?”

“To keep it. He says it’s... that it’s part of us, and more to love.” Her voice broke. “But I can’t do it, not even for him.”

“It’s not something you can do for someone else, Ellie. You can’t have a kid because someone else *wants* you to. That’s not how it works,” Max said softly, still stroking her hair. “If you don’t want it at all then —”

“But I don’t—” El took a heavy breath. “I don’t want to get an

abortion. I've never wanted that. I just don't think... I mean, what other choice do I have?"

"Adoption. You could find a home for it."

"You know I can't do that."

El knew adoption agencies and orphanages weren't all like the one she had come from. The one that hadn't cared where the child went as long as it wasn't their problem anymore. That there were actual people out there who would want her baby, who would love her baby. People who weren't like Papa.

Most people weren't like Papa. She knew that.

But how could she do it? Let something live and grow inside of her for so long and then just... send it away? Let it grow up knowing it was unwanted from the start? Her mother had died delivering her and even though she was a crackhead, El had always had the comfort of knowing she had at least *wanted* her. It was why she'd kept her middle name, her mother's name, even though she legally changed from Jane Brenner to Eleven Wheeler all those years ago. Because her mother had *tried*.

El wasn't even sure she could try.

Was it worse to snuff it out or let it live its life with the knowledge that it hadn't been wanted? How could she do that to a living, breathing baby? Send it away and pretend like she hadn't spent nine months sharing her life with it, like it was nothing to her?

The panic doubled as she tried to decide what scared her worse, the thought of keeping it and corrupting an innocent life, or the thought of sending it out into the world where she couldn't make sure it was safe.

Her hand moved, down to her stomach, resting there as she tried to think of some other impossible solution that wouldn't force her to choose. Max noticed her friend's movement, the thoughtful look in El's eyes as she stared at nothing.

"And you're sure you don't want to keep it? You've really thought

about it?" she asked carefully.

El's eyes snapped back to her, full of fear.

"How can I raise a child, Max? What happens if I have an episode and I'm lying comatose on the floor while it cries because it's hungry? What if I... what if I'm mad and I yell at him or her and they think I hate them? I can't control my emotions... how can I expect a child to understand that?" Her hand didn't move from her stomach. "How can I expect a child to love someone like me?"

"What about your clients?" Max shifted. "I think you're underestimating yourself. And how perceptive kids can be."

"They don't *love* me, Max." She avoided the second half of her friend's statement. "I just help them. Give them somewhere safe to talk about what they're feeling. We're not legally allowed to hug."

"So? They wouldn't keep coming back if you didn't actually make them feel safe. They know you care. Sometimes it's not about... about expectations. It's about trying your hardest."

"What if my hardest isn't enough? What if it needs more than I can give?" She wiped at her eyes, sniffing. "We both know what it's like to grow up needing something our parents can't give us—"

"Okay, do *not* compare yourself to either of our shitty families," Max warned. "You know you and Mike would be *much* better than your piece of shit dad or my abusive excuse for parents. You guys love each other, loving a kid couldn't be that much harder, right?"

"I don't *know*, Max!" she cried desperately.

Max sighed, knowing there was no reasoning with the anxiety. It was something El would have to decide on her own. Instead of continuing the cycle of doubt, she reached for her bag and pulled it onto the couch.

"Okay, alright. You don't have to think about it right now, that's why I came over. So you don't have to think for a bit."

"But—" El started to protest.

“Nope! No thinking.” She started pulling DVDs out of the bag and several oversized Hershey’s bars. “I brought all the chocolate in the house—even Dustin’s secret stash—and the live action Cinderella movie you like, Breakfast Club, Jurassic Park—one and three of course, oh and a huge ass bottle of moscato I’ve been hiding—”

“Max, I can’t drink alcohol,” El rolled her eyes. “I’m pregnant, remember?”

“Oh, right. Okay, well, more for me...”

They giggled, the distractions working like Max had planned, and she got up to put in one of the movies as El sat up and started digging out the chocolate. They’d had sleepovers before, at each other’s houses, banishing their husbands and taking over for the night. Nothing would ever keep them from being sisters, not even marriage.

Max tucked back into El, snuggling under a blanket, watching as the huge Disney logo started playing on the screen. The redhead glanced at her friend from the side of her eye, biting her lip.

“Um, Ellie, is it okay if I stay the night? I don’t think Mike is, um, coming back...”

“He said he was going to,” El frowned. “He promised.”

“Well, last I saw he was two glasses into our expensive-ass whiskey, so I think it’s best if he crashes in the guest room. He’ll be back in the morning.”

“Oh.”

There was a heavy pause, the only sound coming from the disgustingly cheerful music on the screen.

“What if he hates me, Maxie? What if... what if he wants *this* more than me?” she whispered, her hand resting on her stomach again.

“There’s nothing he wants more than you, Eleven. Don’t you remember what he said at your wedding? All those pretty words?” Max could still hear Mike’s voice saying the vows, his eyes full of tears as he grinned at his bride. How could El doubt his love? “He

just needs to remember that, okay? Don't beat yourself up, you know how he gets. Dustin will talk him through it and he'll cool off and you'll figure it out together." Max's hand reached for her friend's and squeezed the cold, clammy fingers. "That's how you always get through things. Together."

"He thinks..." El's voice broke. "He thinks I'm a *monster*. For wanting to get rid of it. But I don't... what else can I *do*? I can't—"

"Ellie, you need to stop. You need to watch the movie and then snuggle with me and then in the morning when Mike comes back, you need to talk to him," she gave her friend a serious look, feeling slightly frustrated. "I mean, god, you're fucking pregnant and I have no good advice for you but I love you and I'm going to take care of you until you figure this out, okay?"

El sniffled but nodded, knowing she was right. "Okay."

She snuggled further into her friend's side, tucking her head against her shoulder like they used to when they were kids, smelling the familiar high school gym musk that clung to all of Max's clothes. The girls she coached for volleyball loved her and she seemed content, she and Dustin often taking trips to visit his mother and going on vacations that he usually surprised her with. For El's twenty-sixth birthday the year before, they'd paid for all four of them to go to New York and watch Giselle, the ballet that had once filled her with insecurity giving her new happiness. It had been a perfect day.

The movie ended, the familiar happily ever after not enough to cheer El up, and Max took another swig of wine straight from the bottle before getting up and putting *Breakfast Club* in. It just reminded El of the not-date she and Mike had gone on, to the movie marathon at the theater. They had fought that day, his jealousy almost causing her to break off their relationship. But he had come back and promised to do better, to fight the irrational fear that had caused him to act out in the first place. He had learned to be less afraid.

Her hand fell to her belly again and she closed her eyes, trying to breathe calmly, still feeling so scared and uncertain. How could anything be alright again? How could she possibly deal with this without losing him?

She couldn't lose him.

Max fell asleep first, and El lay there, her mind going in frantic circles, eyes staring at nothing, more awake than she'd ever been in her life.

Notes for the Chapter:

it's a short chapter, sorry, but i wanted to bring back max and el's friendship cause it makes me happy. el has a lot of doubts that i think are relatable. again, i put a lot of myself into her, my own fears and uncertainties.

i had to add in another chapter because there was too big of a time jump between chapters three and four but if ya'll say nice things to me i might be able to squeeze out chapter three sooner than later. you guys are my biggest motivators so if you want to see something sooner than later, leave me a comment and let me know!

again, thanks for all the support, i never really try to talk about issues and stuff, i just try and write real life but knowing i am touching on subjects that are important and matter to you makes me really happy.

love you all!

-g

3. We've come too far to leave it all behind

Notes for the Chapter:

alright so ya'll convinced me and i'm a pushover when it comes to writing anyways. i'm supposed to be wrapping presents right now and sorry, this one doesn't come giftwrapped, but it's still kind of a gift.

mike comes back and we get some much needed resolution and i'm considering that a gift haha.

that's all i'm gonna say.

The door hinge squeaked and Mike winced, knowing that it was almost as loud as an alarm going off—at least to his wife.

But it was quiet, no frantic skittering of feet on the hardwood floor, no bright smile meeting him as glanced down the hallway, no warm greeting called to him from the kitchen. His heart panged, knowing it was his fault.

So did his head and he winced again at the sunlight, wishing the painkiller he'd taken at Dustin's would just kick in already. The hangover was pretty shitty and now he owed his friend a bottle of whiskey. Expensive whiskey. Not that he really cared, he had bigger things to think about.

Like the fact that he had walked out on his wife last night. His emotionally unstable wife who had stared at him with a terror he'd only seen once before, when she'd stared at her abusive adopted father in an art gallery almost seven years ago. How could he have made her that afraid? How could he have *left her*?

The turmoil he'd drowned in alcohol was returning, but with the fear of not knowing what had happened to El after he left and with the guilt of leaving her in the first place. That had been the worst thing he could have done in that situation and he'd done it anyways.

"El?" he called, feeling suddenly panicked. " *El?!"*

"In here," a soft voice answered.

He followed it to the living room, almost slumping in relief to see her blinking back at him, her eyes still drowsy from sleep, her hair sticking in the back from that one little cowlick that always drove her nuts, the one he always smoothed down with a kiss.

She didn't look different and he felt stupid for thinking she would. She was *pregnant*. It's not like she was far along enough to show, but he thought, for some strange reason, that she should be glowing. Or at least look happy... wasn't that a thing pregnant women did? Maybe just a thing happy pregnant women did.

There was groaned sigh and Mike realized Max was laying on El's stomach, both of them curled up together on the couch. His guilt intensified, knowing it should have been him holding her close, whispering that everything would be okay, that they would figure it out. But he'd left her instead.

Thank fucking Christ for Max, he sighed relief, I don't know what El would have done if she had been alone. Something bad.

"Mike?" El whispered, eyes staring right into him. "Do you hate me?"

"What?"

He said it louder than he meant to and Max sat bolt upright, jolting around before she realized where she was. There was something heavy in the air, El's question reopening the fear that filled her eyes, but Max didn't notice, yawning wildly and looking over her shoulder at Mike.

"Oh good, you're home. See, Ellie? I told you he'd come back."

She patted her friend's arm and Mike frowned.

"Did you think I wouldn't?" He felt hurt. "I promised you I would."

"You were mad," El said softly. "I never know what you'll do when you're mad."

Max noticed the tension, looking between the two and quickly

standing up, leaving the chocolate and wine and reaching for her shoes.

“Y’know, I’m going to head home. It’s Saturday which means it’s naked Star Wars day and I’m not about to break a sacred tradition,” she grinned but the joke fell flat and she shot a look at El, who was still on the couch. “Ellie, if you need *anything*, you call me, okay?”

“Okay.”

She was gone and the house was full of heavy silence again. El was staring down at her hands and Mike wanted to get closer, to go to her and hold her, but somehow he knew he wasn’t allowed yet. He needed to fix what he’d done first.

“El, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have left you last night. That was shitty and stupid and—”

“Do you hate me? For wanting to get rid of it?”

She cut to the point, her eyes dragging back to his, her mouth trembling. The terror was there again and he felt his heart sink, knowing he’d been the one to put it there by rejecting her when she’d needed him most. And she was right about one thing—he had been mad last night. Pissed. He’d ranted to Dustin until the fourth glass of whiskey, letting his friend lead him to the guest bedroom and passing out into blissful darkness where he didn’t have to think or feel.

Because he didn’t *know*. How to feel, what to do. He’d always known the answer to every question and problem thrown his way. But this... this didn’t have just one answer, and the one he wanted wasn’t the one that was right for her.

But what was best for their child?

Maybe that had been his first mistake. Letting it become theirs, letting himself imagine a tiny girl with his smattering of freckles and her hazel-brown eyes, staring up at him and smiling. He’d imagined their future with whatever lived inside of her, gave it a face and a name, let it become *real*. And then when she hadn’t been able to see it, to understand what she was suggesting they get rid of... he’d been

so *angry* .

But he didn't hate her. How could he? She was part of his soul, part of his entire being. He knew what it was like to not have her, to know she was with someone else. Nothing had hurt more than that and he'd promised in his wedding vows, staring into her smiling eyes, that he would never let them be separated again.

"I don't hate you, El," he took a step closer. "You know I could never hate you."

"You could... because of *this*," she breathed, her hand on her stomach. "You could want it more than me. You could think I'm a murderer. You could think I'm a *monster*."

She was shivering, clutching her abdomen tightly and staring at him, her hazel-browns shining with unshed tears.

"You *could* hate me," she stated softly. "You could."

It was one those things Mike thought he would never have to face. When she had told him about her fear of having kids, he'd understood. She'd grown up in such a dysfunctional home and had so many issues with herself, how could she not be afraid? So he gave up that dream, deciding that it was a compromise worth making if it meant she'd never leave his arms. She was his moon, reflecting his light back to him, her love more than enough for him. The adoration that shone in her eyes when she looked at him and kissed him and made love to him... how could he need more than that?

But then that impossible fantasy had become a reality, living inside of her. It was something he didn't think he'd want so bad. So badly that the thought of her wanting to get rid of it would make him angry.

Mike would never say he was pro-abortion—who would? But he knew there were situations and circumstances he would never understand. That the world was dark and cruel, that things happened to people, bad things, that created other bad things. He couldn't judge someone else when he didn't know them or their story, even though the thought of snuffing out the beginnings of a life made his heart hurt. But it wasn't his choice.

"I'm never going to hate you, El. Ever. I love you," his feet had taken him to the couch and he knelt down next to her, at her eye-level. "I want to love all of you, okay? Even the parts you're scared of."

"You don't think I'm disgusting? That I'm terrible for wanting to get rid of it?"

"No, I—" he sighed heavily. "I don't want you to want that, El. But I can't change how you think, I've never been able to *change* you. What you want is—" he swallowed heavily. "It hurts me. I... I want to pretend like it doesn't but it does."

"I'm sorry," she said hollowly.

"But, El, babe, you're right. I told you when we got married that I didn't need kids to be happy with you. I promised that would be something we wouldn't... do," he sighed, feeling something inside of him aching. "If that's what—" he had to stop and take a deep breath. "If that's what you want... I won't break my promise and make you have it."

His hands had found hers beneath the blanket, her fingers cold, and he finally looked up and met her eyes. Tears were pouring down her cheeks and she looked scared again, but a different scared. It wasn't terror, more of a mix of relief and uncertainty and... sadness?

"But I don't *want* to kill it," she cried out suddenly, her hands gripping onto his like he was the only thing in the entire world holding her down. "I don't want to hurt it, Mike, but I will b-because that's all I ever do is *hurt* people and I'll hurt it too."

She was sobbing and then he was sitting on the couch next to her, holding her close, like he should have last night.

"I c-can't be a good mom, Mike," her voice was utterly broken and his heart ached for her. "I'm not even a good person. I'll bitch at it or ignore it or—"

"El, woah, stop it. You're being irrational. You can't know those things," he tried to break her from her panicked thinking.

"I *do* know. How can I love something and take care of something

when I can't even do those things for myself?"

"Stop it, El."

"I'll make it hate me, just like I hated Papa—"

"*El!*"

His voice cracked like a whip and she cut herself off, staring at him. He looked pissed, but she knew why. It happened anytime she mentioned Brenner, *especially* when she called him Papa. He didn't like when she allowed her former-father back in *any* way, but comparing herself to him?

It pissed Mike off, that the asshole come out of the lawsuit basically unscathed, but El didn't care anymore, especially since she knew he wouldn't be able to adopt again. She hoped he would rot in hell, but found her life was better and easier when she didn't think about him at all.

So she didn't. Most of the time.

"El, listen to me," Mike's voice was firm. "You. Are. Not. *Him*. You've never been anything like him, even though he tried to make you that way... cold and unfeeling. You're loving and kind. Funny, sweet, amazing... everything I didn't even know I could want in a person. And I *know* you would be such a great mom."

"I don't know *how*, Mike. I never... I never had a mom," she protested.

"So? Not everyone does. That doesn't stop them from being amazing parents. You can't keep letting your fear convince you that you're terrible when you're just... not," he softened, his hand reaching up to cup her cheek gently. "Do you think I would love you if I thought you were a terrible person? That I would have married you and bought a house with you and made a life with you?"

"No," she sniffled.

"Then why can't you believe me now? You love me so much, El. I know you don't think you do but it's true. If you can love our child

even just a fraction of how much you love me... they'll never doubt you or hate you or think you're terrible."

She was staring at him, her eyes wide, and he pulled her towards him, leaning over the couch and pressing his lips against hers. He kissed her the way she'd kissed him when she'd confessed she loved him all those years ago, with such pure belief and honesty that there was no room for doubt. He believed in her, and it gave her hope.

When he pulled back she gasped, still staring at him. Then she blinked, looking away, her hands trembling in his grip.

"I'm scared, Mike," she admitted. "I'm scared I won't be enough."

"You wouldn't be alone, El. I'd be part of it too," he reminded her. "When you have your bad days I'd still be there, to take care of this baby when you couldn't. I know you're not perfect, but nobody is. Kids don't expect perfect parents, they just want... love. And acceptance. I think," he frowned. "I mean, that's all I wanted from my dad. For him to just show up... but he didn't. And I won't make that mistake. I'll always be there."

His hand slid under the blanket, resting on her stomach, his eyes never leaving hers.

"For *both* of you. I promise."

It was a solemn silence and El knew he was telling the truth, something in her unclenching at the sincerity in his eyes. But it was only for a second and then the fear sprang back up.

"What if—" she started.

"El, quit it," he sighed, feeling tired. "You know anything that starts with 'what if' is usually bullshit. Isn't that what your therapist says? Actually, maybe we could talk to her, together, before you decide."

"Do you... want to?" She raised her eyebrows, surprised.

"I'll do anything you need me to, El."

Her heart gave out and she fell against him, feeling a wave of relief

as she realized that she truly wasn't alone. That she was married to the most amazing, most supportive man in the entire world and that he was willing to help her. Pressing her nose against his collarbone, she inhaled heavily, wanting to feel safe like she always did in his arms.

"I need you to hold me. I need you to hold me and tell me it's going to be okay," her eyes filled with tears again. "Please."

He was on the couch with her in a heartbeat, tucking her against him, their bodies fitting together like they always did. His arms squeezed her tightly and she pressed her forehead against his throat, clinging to him as he kissed her hair over and over. Her breath shuddered out of her and she felt herself calming, felt the familiar peace he always helped her find.

"It's okay, El. We're going to figure this out." They were the gentlest whispers. "It's going to be okay. I love you. We're okay."

They lay there until she finally, peacefully, fell asleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

next chapter we get more of a decision, but at least now we know that they're okay. who am i kidding, they're always gonna be okay. but el still needs to figure out what she wants and it doesn't seem like she quite knows.

i have more to say about this whole topic of pregnancy but i can't say it yet so maybe next chapter which will hopefully be out the day after christmas. keep your eyes peeled! my goal is to have it completely written by new year's, but i've still got a ways to go.

i hope all of you lovely people have a wonderful christmas and if you don't celebrate christmas then i just hope you have a wonderful next few days. my home is a madhouse right now but i'm excited to see my family.

happy merry!

-g

4. Say that it's gonna be alright, that it's gonna be okay

Notes for the Chapter:

aaaaaand here it is! this will answer some questions and i tried to really get into el's mind so you could understand why she makes the choice she does, but i'm gonna explain it a little bit afterwards too.

mike goofily dancing to 80s music is just what's going to happen someday, fight me.

Mike had managed, after a few hours of napping, to get El off the couch and into the kitchen, fixing up the wafflemaker and digging out the box of mix from the fridge. She watched him from the table, still exhausted, partially from the emotions, mostly from the lack of sleep the night before, but also a bit because she was... pregnant. And that, apparently, just made you tired.

“Savory or sweet?” he asked her.

“Savory.”

“Do you want some kind of meat on it? Or eggs?”

“Fish. Sardines.”

He paused, turning to look at her with an eyebrow raised. For the most part she preferred her fish raw and rolled up in seaweed. The sardines had come in some gift basket they'd been sent, not something they'd actually bought. He glanced at her stomach. Oh right. Pregnant. Cravings.

“Fish? Really?”

“Salty sounds good...” she frowned at his judgemental gaze. “What? We have sardines in the cupboard. Just put them on top.”

“Oh... kay.” He grimaced. “Just veggies in the waffle then?”

“Yes. Onions. Tomatoes. Oh, and some pickles... and maybe some

mayo on top?”

“Jesus, El, that sounds disgusting.”

“I wasn’t offering to *share*,” she crossed her arms. “I’ll make it myself if you don’t—”

“No, I’m gonna make it but I’m going to be grossed out the entire time,” he said it matter-of-factly, turning to grin at her over his shoulder. “But I’m telling you so you’re not surprised when I almost throw up.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t help but smirk at his goofy grin. What a dork. He always knew how to cheer her up and make her laugh. She watched as he chopped up some onions and tomatoes and threw them into the mix before opening the fridge for the jar of pickles, turning on the bluetooth speaker that lived on the windowsill and playing some music from his phone, shaking his hips to the beat.

It was “You Make My Dreams Come True” by Hall & Oates and he danced as he bustled around the kitchen, humming along happily. Her forgiveness had cheered him up and all he wanted to do was make his hungry wife some food and help her feel better after walking out on her the night before.

They had called and made a doctor’s appointment to do one last test and have a check-up and then see what their options were. The second call had been to her therapist, asking if they could schedule an emergency session as soon as possible. Maybe it was weird that El—a therapist with a master’s in psychology herself—needed her own therapist but when it came down to it she felt better talking to someone every other week. It had been several months since she’d had a really bad episode, and somehow she knew her visits with her kind-eyed therapist helped.

It was a start but since it was the weekend they wouldn’t be able to actually see anyone until Monday, which meant another day of tedious limbo. Mike hoped he could keep her calm and rational until then.

But for now he felt happy knowing that their relationship was still

stable and their marriage wasn't falling apart. So he danced... badly.

"Twist and shout my way out

And wrap yourself around me"

He did a little shimmy as he poured the batter onto the hot waffle iron and El smirked.

"Cause I ain't the way you found me

And I'll never be the same, oh yeah"

The dirty bowl ended up into the sink and he did a little jazz square before sliding over to the fridge to grab the mayonnaise. It was too much to handle and she laughed, the sound lightening the air. He turned, grinning again, and then danced over to her to steal a kiss. She let him, felt how warm his lips were pressed against hers, the usual soft reassurance that came with it settling into her stomach.

Suddenly she reached up, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him down to her, kissing him fiercely. He barely had time to react before she was on her feet, trying to push him onto the table, kissing fiery trails down his neck as he tried to catch his breath. It wouldn't be the first time they'd made love on their table, the entire house was pretty much fair game since it was just the two of them, but before she could even unbutton his shirt there was a high-pitched beeping from the wafflemaker.

"Oh! My waffle!" She popped up and turned, running to the counter, completely forgetting what she had been starting.

Mike sat up slowly, feeling a bit dazed and slightly disappointed. Were mood swings another pregnancy thing? Jesus, how was he supposed to survive this?

Oh right. We're not doing this. It'll be over soon, he remembered, a flash of pain igniting his chest. *Don't forget that.*

That was the conclusion he'd come too, that they were going to the doctor for a check up and then calling the nearest clinic to get rid of it. Even though he'd been serious about his promise to her, about not

making her have it, it made his whole chest hurt to think of the potential they were going to snuff out. How he'd never see the tiny face with El's button nose and eyes and his freckles.

It's her choice. I promised.

She turned, noticing he was quiet, her waffle on her plate. Her eyebrows raised and he realized he was frowning, quickly hopping off the table and walking to her, pasting a smile on his face and hoping it didn't feel fake. El wasn't fooled.

"You're not happy," she stated. "Why?"

"It's... nothing, El. Nothing I haven't already talked about. Don't worry, okay?" He tried to reassure her, taking the waffle from her and reaching for the mayo. "It's your choice and I know that so don't worry. I'm not mad or changing my mind."

"You're not mad. You're sad."

She was watching him, her carefully trained eye reading him. Sometimes it bothered him a little when she used her experienced psychological mind to assess him, not liking that she treated him like a patient. He knew he had his issues but something about her making him talk about it instead of letting him decide to talk about it bothered him.

"Yeah. You're right," he shrugged and tried not to grimace as he opened the can of sardines. "I mean, that's allowed, right? To be sad?" He glanced at her. "Or do you want me to pretend to be happy about it?"

"About what?"

"About... killing it."

There was a silence and he scooped the sardines out, opening each one and removing the bones before setting them on top of the waffle. He barely managed not to gag. Sushi was fine but this was not something he enjoyed. Only for her.

El crossed her arms and looked away. She didn't like his words but

they were reality and while he had made the decision to be supportive, he figured his feelings were valid.

“I told you... I don’t want to kill it,” she shifted uneasily.

“But you don’t want to keep it,” he said flatly. “There’s only two options. You know that.”

“I just can’t... have a baby, Mike. It’s like I’m losing control of who I am and I just—”

“Why is that bad? To lose yourself a little bit and give it to someone else?” He tilted his head. “Isn’t that what you did for me?”

“I didn’t have to *grow you inside of me for months*. That... it ruins everything in your body. And I don’t know—” her voice suddenly broke and she sniffled, wiping at her face like she was mad she was crying again. “I don’t think my scars allow for stretching. There’s too much to go wrong and, god, I’d have a tiny person *inside of me*.” Her hands were shaking. “How is that not supposed to totally scare me shitless?”

Mike hadn’t considered that, but, being a man, he hadn’t really needed to. He could imagine her with a cute round belly, it wasn’t that hard, and if she really thought he would care about what her body looked like afterward, she didn’t know him. Nothing would keep him from loving inch of her, not even stretch marks or belly chub.

But the whole “growing a human” thing was kind of intense. He’d always admired pregnancy, how amazing the female body was as it created a new life. How was that not the most fucking hardcore thing a human could do? Create *another* human? His biology students always thought he got a little too excited when he taught them about reproduction and birth, but it was just too cool to not be excited about.

He slightly suspected that was one of the reasons the university now had him teach Physics instead.

So to him the whole process seemed like a miracle. Something he

would love to watch and be a part of. But maybe that wasn't quite how she saw it.

"It's okay to be scared, El. I'm never going to be mad at you for that," he turned, setting the waffle on the counter. "But it's hard for me to understand, I'll admit that. Don't you want to feel it getting bigger? To know that it's *you*, your body... making something new? Something that's never existed before?"

She blinked at him. "I don't know."

"It's like... I've always told you your body is perfect because it is. And now it could do... do what it was made to do? Not that like... women are obligated to have babies, but..." he gestured to her stomach. "I mean, it's already started. I would never have *made* you have a baby, El, but this accident... sometimes things are supposed to happen... I dunno." He grinned at her, that crooked one that made her heart swell. "Like bumping into people at college bookstores or breaking mini-golf courses. You can't blame me for looking at this in a positive way. Too many good things have happened on accident."

Her hand covered her belly and she turned away, trembling. Part of her understood what he meant, how it was supposed to be amazing not something to be afraid of. She had been looking at it as some sort of mistake, a missed birth control pill, but he was seeing it as some sort of miracle, another odd mishap, like the ones that had brought them together in the first place.

But she didn't always take care of herself, how was she supposed to take care of something inside of her? To give up one of the things she'd always had control over... her body.

I was never careful with it, I scarred it and hurt it and tried to destroy it, she looked down at her hand on her stomach. *At least this time I would be making something. Doing something good instead of just hurting myself.*

His voice interrupted her thinking.

"Look, El, I get that it freaks you out. And honestly... if this had happened back in college or something when we were broke and lived in that tiny apartment, I would understand it not being right.

But we have this awesome house that has space for a kid, and friends nearby and my parents—my mom—will do literally anything to help. We have plenty of money in the bank and we paid the mortgage off so the house is officially ours... we might have to get a new car or something but there just isn't..." he sighed. "I just don't see why we *couldn't*. That's why it's hard for me."

El was staring at the floor, still holding her stomach, but hearing every word. He was right. They were financially stable. While they had burned through some of her settlement money the past four years—both of their master's programs, his doctorate program, new car, new house, several dozen trips around the world, and a few splurges—they'd put the majority of it into Roth IRAs and savings accounts, making sure to keep enough available for emergencies. They were *technically* millionaires, but after taxes and investing, they were mostly just wealthy.

You couldn't tell. The house they'd bought was older—more character, Mike had said—and both of their jobs paid well but not so well that they felt rich. In some ways they seemed mostly middle class, but in truth they could afford more than the average person. They just didn't *need* to.

"I... I know, Mike," she said softly, still not sure. "I'm sorry."

By all means, it was the perfect time for them to have a kid and she was starting to wonder if it was as much of a horror show as she was imagining. So far all she'd been able to think about were all the reasons they shouldn't have it. She hadn't stop to think about the reasons why they *could*.

"But I told you, it's your decision and when we see the doctor on Monday, maybe she'll tell us a good place to—"

"Mike? What if we don't?" Her heart was racing but she had to at least consider the option she'd refused so far. "What would happen?"

Her anxiety wanted to show her everything that could go wrong, but she knew he might have a better idea. He was the one who had already imagined it. What picture had he painted, what would it be like? Was it something she could want?

“Um, well, we’d have to see the doctor more, depending on how far along you are...” he squinted, like he was really thinking about it. “But we’d have to start eating healthier for one thing. Which is overdue, I mean, I turn thirty next year... I need to get more vegetables for both of us. Um, you’d start taking some vitamins and we could get some books about pregnancy... I don’t know what it’s like,” he grinned. “I’ve never done this before either, El. But we would get to learn together, what he or she would be and then...”

He paused, reaching for her stomach and gently setting his hand there.

“You’d get bigger and you’d be the cutest fucking thing in the entire world, I know that for sure,” his eyes softened as he looked down at her. “And you’d probably be sick and feel like shit and have to pee all the time. Mood swings. Cravings.” He glanced pointedly at the disgusting waffle on the counter. “You’d probably be miserable honestly, but... I mean, you’d be making a human being and if that’s not the coolest thing ever, I don’t know what is.” He paused, nodding thoughtfully. “Basically, you’d be the most hardcore person on this entire planet and I would get to worship the ground you walk on.”

Her hand slapped his shoulder and she snorted a laugh. He was always so ridiculous in the way he described things and she could help but laugh. Mike’s eyes brightened, encouraged by her mirth.

“No, seriously! I’ll be *that* husband. You want pizza at three AM? I’m in fucking the car headed to the nearest gas station. Your back hurts and you need a rub? Get me the lotion. You want to punch me in the face because I left the toilet seat up again? Swing away, babe. I’ll be your personal punching bag.”

He was grinning as she giggled, sounding like some sort of bad car salesman. In a way it was a pitch, a way for him to let her know that he was serious about doing whatever she could need. She wouldn’t be alone, he would be there every step of the way.

But it’s not going to happen, he felt the joy slowly drain out of him. Don’t get your hopes up. This is just an idea and she doesn’t want it.

She noticed him droop a bit, knowing what he was thinking. Biting

her lip, she leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his ribs and holding onto him, her anchor, letting his warmth fill her. He made it sound easy, sound like some sort of happy fantasy and she just wasn't sure if it could be a reality. He had admitted she would feel like shit, but he'd said he would love her and take care of her anyways.

His arms went around her shoulders like they always did when she hugged him, squeezing her tightly, a kiss pressed to the top of her head. The stinking waffle was still on the counter, her disgusting creation made with love. The one he had made for her after coming home and apologizing, holding her close and telling her he would support her no matter what, letting her fall asleep in his arms. Promising to always be there.

He wouldn't leave her. She wouldn't be alone. They would be in it together.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Maybe..." her heart was racing, but she didn't feel the terror rise again, the fear softened by the reality she held in her arms. "Maybe we can think about it. About keeping it."

His arms tightened automatically, his whole body jerking in surprise. He had already given up on that, her fear too much for him to think that she could change her mind.

"What? Are you serious?" His eyes were comically large. "I thought you were afraid—"

"You're here now." *Like you weren't last night.* "I was scared and alone and everything seemed so terrible that I didn't want to deal with any of it—"

"I'm sorry," he choked. "I should never have left you. It was such a dick move."

"You came back. You're here now. I'm... I'm not afraid when you're here." Her voice was quiet but she tried to make him understand. "You said you'd be there for me... for us . I'm scared of what I could

do to a kid, Mike, but... I don't want to kill it. Or... send it away. It's..." she was trembling but his grip on her kept her steady. "It's already started. I'm pregnant and if I'm going to have a baby I would want to keep it. I would want it to be ours."

She wasn't changing her mind for him. She wasn't changing her mind at all. She was still scared, scared of losing control of her of her body, of dealing with childbirth, of corrupting an innocent life with her fears. But from the moment after she'd stopped to really think about it, she had known she didn't want an abortion, even though she had tried to convince herself it was the best choice.

She had wanted it to just go *away*, to not have to deal with any of the crushing fear or self-disappointment. And that had been the only way to make it go away... but it had made her stomach hurt and her lungs squeeze when Max had asked her if that was what she really wanted to do. Because despite everything she was trying to tell herself and how anxious it made her, she didn't want to get rid of it. She just didn't *want* to have it either.

But Mike's vision made it easier. It didn't feel impossible anymore. He had been right when he said that it was already starting, the tiny being was already there, a tiny existence living inside of her. She had lived in denial for so long, refusing to let it be an option, deciding it was it something she was too afraid to do. But it was here and it was good timing and even though she was afraid some part of her knew she could do it.

They could do it.

Together.

"I love you, Mike," she whispered, clinging to him, feeling him solid against her. "I love you."

"I love you more, El." He squeezed her, crushing her against his chest.

His words were filled with joy at the possibility she was offering. Of the idea she was starting to consider, looking past her fears. It wouldn't be the first time he'd showed her the way, been the example

she'd tried to follow, only now they were married and even if everything went to shit and they lost everything, he knew one thing for certain.

"I'll love you every day of my life," he whispered back. "I promise."

Notes for the Chapter:

okay so i personally don't want to have kids because pregnancy freaks me the fuck out and i tried to give el some of that fear but more from the perspective of someone who's afraid of having/raising a kid vs someone who's afraid of pregnancy. don't get me wrong, it's an amazing process that i respect and admire but if i ever want a kid i'm just gonna adopt lol.

so for el her knee-jerk reaction to want to get rid of it comes from her anxiety vs just being scared of pregnancy, though she definitely has some fears of that too. and her deciding to keep it isn't going to make the issues and the fears go away, but we'll see that in later chapters. that's the point of the story, it's another one where el confronts something she's scared of and mike helps her and is kind of an example?

and a big part of her decision is because it's good timing. i think circumstances play a big role in having a child (not counting like third world countries and stuff where there's no birth control) and if you aren't in a place where you could take care of a kid and make sure it had a good life, sometimes it's better not to have it. but mike and el are in kind of the perfect spot so that helps her feel more confident about keeping it.

anyways all of that literally is just my opinion and only really applies to this story and i'm not saying people can't have kids or whatever and i'm not encouraging abortions i'm just trying to explain lol.

it's not TOO deep but i feel like i need to so ya'll can understand where i'm trying to go with this story and what el is supposed to be thinking.

jesus that was long. okay, well i hope you guys had nice christmas/holidays and i'll try and post the next chapter soon!

let me know what you think about el's decision, i love hearing your thoughts and stuff, it makes me think.

-g

sidenote: idk if this a midwestern thing or what but there are definitely gas stations that are open 24/7 where you can buy pizza, like down the street from my house. it's kind of nice.

5. But the planets all aligned when you looked into my eyes

Notes for the Chapter:

i was gonna post this like twelve hours ago but i didn't cause i was too busy writing more of it and like... you guys holy fuck i'm really excited for you to read more of it.

this chapter is a bit of a filler but i promise i'm gonna update again soon cause i'm feeling really motivated and i want to keep that feeling going. i've been reading so many like... birth stories and i'm so horrified lmao. i google so many pregnancy questions my adds have started showing me like strollers and breast pumps like nO NOPE NO THANK YOU.

yeah but mike and el are cute as fuck.

"So... you're keeping it?" Max asked, eyes wide.

"I guess so. I mean... I never *wanted* to have an abortion and Mike's been..." A smile played on El's lips as she thought about her husband. "He's been amazing. I think I can do it, Max. I never *wanted* to but then it happened and now I..."

"Now you want it?"

"I don't *not* want it anymore. That's the best way I can describe it. But I'm still working on being totally okay with it," she answered truthfully. "It's... the better option. And I'm not alone. I know that now."

The coffeeshop they were at was fairly busy, the baristas buzzing around like hummingbirds as people got their daily caffeine boost. El had found it while she was still in school, a few blocks from campus tucked between an antique shop and a dance studio. There was a bakery down the street that kept the shop supplied with fresh muffins

and slices of coffee cake and the two women had met there more than once to talk and catch up.

El sipped her herbal tea, foregoing her beloved coffee since her doctor had told her to avoid caffeine as much as possible. It had only been about three and a half weeks since she'd discovered what was growing inside of her, and sometimes it still made her want to panic. But she was trying.

"I know you can do it, Ellie. You've always been good at things you've wanted to be good at..." Max tried to lighten the mood, sensing El's doubts. She grinned at her friend. "Like geometry junior year? That was the fucking worst."

"I had a tutor," El protested. "I was terrible at it until he helped me."

"But you still tutored me. Math is the worst. I wouldn't have passed Trig senior year of college if it hadn't been for Dustin *and* Lucas."

"They're the dream team for math, that's for sure."

They smiled across the table at each other and then Max let her gaze dip down to El's stomach again, like she was still trying to process the idea of someone being there.

"It's weird, I won't lie. Does it... do you feel different?"

"Not really? Mike says I have some mood swings but I haven't had a lot of morning sickness. Just lucky I guess. It's mostly been diet. Like, I have to think about it more and be more aware of what I eat now but for the most part..." El wrinkled her nose. "The smell of bleach makes me want to hurl though. Or like, cooking meat? Nuh uh, I could just—" she gagged.

Max looked alarmed, reaching for her friend and El laughed, letting the brief nauseous wave pass by. Just thinking about it could make her puke. It was weird for sure.

"It's okay for the most part, I guess. I have to take these vitamins and they're fucking huge so that sucks. I don't know... it felt so real when I found out." She crossed her arms, holding herself tightly. "Because I was so scared and it felt like it was the worst thing that could ever

happen. Now it's just... it's what's going to happen. I'm going to have a baby."

"Wow," Max breathed.

Suddenly her eyes welled with tears and El blinked in surprise as her friend grabbed the nearest napkin and blew her nose. Max didn't cry that much, what was up with this?

"Sorry, I'm just... I'm so happy for you, Ellie. You're so much better. Before you would have just... done something terrible and now you're here facing all the things you were so afraid of..." She dabbed at her eyes. "I'm so fucking proud of you."

El reached across the table and grabbed Max's hand, squeezing it and looking at the blubbing redhead with fond eyes. If it wasn't for her, she wouldn't have made it this far and they both knew it.

"It helps when I have people who love me. I wouldn't be here without you..." She was struck by a sudden idea. "That's why... you're going to be the godmother."

"Wha—What?"

Max's eyes were suddenly huge and El grinned at her across the table.

"Godmother? You know, like the thing in Cinderella but without the wings?"

"You want *me*?" Max choked out.

"Who else?" El squeezed her hand again. "If anything ever happened to me or Mike, I know you would do everything to take care of our kid. And even if I am still weirded out by all of this, I can't imagine anyone else in the entire world I trust more."

"Oh my god, *Ellie*," Max gasped.

She somehow reached across the table and hugged her friend, almost knocking over their mugs. El laughed but hugged her back, enjoying the small piece of happiness she was able to share despite the uncertainty of the future. No matter what happened, she would

always trust Max the most.

When they let go, Max stopped holding back on baby questions.

“So, do you want a boy or a girl? Do you have name ideas? Do his parents know? Have you guys started making a nursery? What colors are you doing? Should I start planning a baby shower?”

“Woah. Um...”

El sat back, her hand resting on her stomach. It was a new habit, but felt strangely comfortable, even though she wasn’t showing yet. They’d figured out she was a little over ten weeks now, but it could take up to sixteen weeks to show and, to be honest, she wasn’t in any rush. Having the belly would make it all so much more real and she just wasn’t sure if she was ready for that yet.

So far they’d been living life the same. It was the usual routine, both going to work, coming home and eating dinner. Mike cooked more though, trying out healthier recipes with lots of vegetables instead of bringing home greasy takeout. He wasn’t the best cook, but he *tried*, and El found him rather adorable as he glared at the broccoli and peppers on the cutting board, a frilly apron tied around his waist. It was always right after he got home, still in his work clothes, his dress shirt rolled up over his elbows and his tie thrown onto the table.

His acceptance of her fear and willingness to help even in such a terrifying situation had somehow made him even *more* attractive, and she oftentimes found herself standing in the doorway of the kitchen, just watching.

I love him so much, she’d think with a sigh. *I’m the luckiest woman on the planet.*

Sometimes he would catch her watching and walk over for a kiss, which she willingly gave, before returning to the stove and trying not to burn the stir-fry or pasta or falafel or whatever it was he was trying to cook.

Despite everything, he was still her rock and she tried to thank him with kisses at night and cuddles in bed and breakfast in the morning.

It was all so charmingly domestic, and somehow she was finding it easier and easier to imagine tiny feet pattering after them, like some sort of cheesy Lifetime movie. But she still couldn't say she *wanted* it.

"Ellie? Did I ask too much?"

"Um," El snapped back to reality, blinking at her friend. "We don't have a name yet and we can't find out the sex for another month and a half at least. I think... Mike wants it to be a girl, or he thinks it's a girl. He accidentally referred to it as 'she' once," she said slowly. "But honestly, I think it's a boy."

"How can you tell?"

"I don't know... I just *feel* it, you know? I have some ideas for names but... it just feels too soon," she sighed. "We haven't told his parents yet. Or Lucas or Will."

"You haven't?"

"Nope. So far only you and Dustin know. We just want... to make sure it's right. Before we tell anyone. Just in case."

In case I change my mind, she sighed.

Realistically it was too late to change her mind as far as getting rid of it. But some part of her was still hesitant to let her hopes rise. To think that it could actually happen and be okay. She was afraid something would go wrong and they would lose it or she wouldn't be strong enough and would end up giving it away.

They were the silent doubts that Mike noticed when they lay in bed together at night, when he would pull her closer and stroke her hair until she fell asleep.

What would I do without him?

"Wow, I feel special," Mike wiggled happily. "I know the secret!"

"Yeah, I mean, I would have told you anyways. Um, as far as a baby shower goes... still going to have to wait. I don't know who you'd invite anyways..."

“Well, there’s Mike’s sisters and mom, your sister, all the guys, and that one girl you met in your Theories of Personality class? Katie something?”

“Oh yeah... I don’t know how many people would actually want to come,” El shrugged, unconvinced that her pregnancy was anything to really celebrate. She and Mike still hadn’t really celebrated it... just accepted it. “But whatever, when the time comes, you can do whatever you want.”

Max rubbed her hands together evilly and El frowned.

“Okay, I regret those words. Maybe not *whatever*...”

“Too late! You’re going to have the most epic baby shower and you are gonna love it.”

The rest of the morning sped by as Max told her about her volleyball girls’ teenage drama and how she thought they might make it to state that year. They talked about Dustin’s newest app he was developing, working with a company to make an interactive game that taught the basics of programming. Mike’s thesis for his doctorate was always brought up and El paused to think about it.

It had been several years since he’d started and El wasn’t sure, but it had seemed like he’d been losing steam on the project. He didn’t talk about it much, just came home looking tired and gave half-answers when she asked. When he got like that, she knew he was struggling and tried to do little things to cheer him up. Sometimes she would make breakfast for dinner (his favorite food) or put on a Lord of the Rings (usually The Two Towers, his favorite) and make him lay down on the couch so she could cuddle him or occasionally she would run a hot bath and make him get in with her (any time she was naked was his favorite) and she would try and make him relax. He still appreciated her little gestures and it always worked.

But now they had a child they would have to provide for and she woke up sometimes in the middle of the night to see him still awake, typing frantically at his keyboard. He was always frowning, his face lit up by the glow of the screen and El would roll over and gently push it closed, tugging his arm towards her until he would give in

and put it down and hold her until he fell asleep. She wasn't sure, but she had a suspicion that the burgeoning reality that was growing inside of her was giving him new motivation.

"He's been working on it more, I think. I know he's more than half way but I haven't asked lately, maybe I should," she pondered.

"Something about wormholes and alternate dimensions?"

"Yeah, he's going into the physics side of it... it's all way over my head, honestly, but I try to listen when he needs to talk about it loud."

"Oh, I know *all* about that, sometimes Dustin tells me about all this technological programming stuff and I mean, I know how to use Google and Microsoft word, but designing things? It's like a whole other language." She smiled fondly. "But he gets so excited I can't help but try. That's what marriage is, right? Just trying?"

Max and Dustin had slowly been transforming their house into a tech-driven wonderland, with voice-activated everything and screens in every room. It helped, since Dustin could test his new ideas in his own home before presenting them and he was wildly successful, his charismatic personality and bright intelligence helping to create new apps programs that helped to make everyday life easier.

El glanced at her phone and realized it was almost noon. It was Sunday and she and Mike were going to catch the newest X-Men movie and grab lunch. Usually she tried to get him to go to the gym with her, but the past few weeks she had been trying to tone down the exercise and rest more.

A few years earlier her therapist had suggested she try exercise to help with her depression and the payout from her ex-father's case helped pay for a trainer. She'd settled on weekly kickboxing classes and twice weekly workouts, sometimes with Max or Mike but usually by herself. It helped and made her feel stronger and she enjoyed knowing how to kick a person into unconsciousness if necessary. The past few weeks she'd been toning it down, though, not wanting to strain herself too much.

“Sorry, Max, I have to go meet Mike, we’re catching a movie and—”

“The new X-Men one?” Max grinned. “We saw it last night. Super good.”

“These nerd boys,” El lamented. “I don’t know how we handle it.”

“Mmhm, I know you love it, Mrs. Nerd Queen.”

“Hey! You’re not allowed to call me that!”

They laughed and hugged and then parted ways. El met her husband at their favorite sushi place. Growing up stupid rich meant she did still have a taste for finer things and every now and then she liked a break from waffles to get some toro nigiri or vietnamese bun or a goodass cut of steak. She still had weird cravings for fish. On waffles. With mayonnaise. But mostly just fish, so they went out for sushi a lot.

He stood up when she walked to the table, pecking her cheek and pulling her chair out for her, as if she was too fragile to do it herself. Part of her wanted to be annoyed but over the years she’d learned to accept his tiny gestures of love—even if they were unnecessary.

“What’d you and Max talk about?” he asked after the waiter took their order and left.

“The usual. You and Dustin. Her volleyball girls. Oh, and the fact that I’m fucking pregnant,” she deadpanned.

Mike grinned unabashedly. “That’s my favorite one, I think.”

“You just had to go and put a baby in me,” she huffed. “So rude.”

“I think I remember you have something to do with it too,” he was still grinning.

The fact that they were able to joke about it meant that it was getting easier. Less and less did the anxiety keep her awake at night or make her stare off during one of her sessions. Her clients hadn’t noticed, thankfully, and she wasn’t sure what she was going to tell them when it was noticeable. Another one of those things she would have to deal

with when she got there.

Mike was staring at her dreamily from across the table, his chin resting on his palm, and she wrinkled her nose at him as she took a sip of her water. He had a habit of staring sometimes and she didn't know why.

"Your hair is getting long," he said finally. "It looks really nice."

"Really? I was just thinking about cutting it again... it's such a pain in the ass when it's long."

"But it's pretty, it makes you look... softer."

"Ugh," she groaned. "I'm going to get all... soft. Don't remind me."

"What? No, don't even start with that..."

"Mike, do you have any idea what having a baby does to a woman's body? Don't you have a degree in biology?"

"Well, yeah—"

"Literally every part of me is going to get stretched out. I'm going to be flabby and gross and—"

"Hey."

His hand was on hers and she exhaled, not wanting to meet his eyes. She already knew what he was going to say but let him say it anyways.

"I don't care what happens, nothing is going to make me stop loving you or your body. I mean, if anything I'm going to love it more... it's literally *making* our baby. How fucking rad is that?"

"Rad, huh?" She smirked. "That's a new one."

"I have an entire dictionary full of words to tell you just how great you are."

"What a nerd."

He grinned at her happily and then the waiter came with their edamame, Mike's suggestion, and El started chowing down. For the most part they talked about X-Men, what he thought was going to happen in the movie, and El listened to him chatter happily, resting her knee against his leg, feeling calmer just being able to touch him and be around him.

Somehow the conversation turned into the complexities of mutant genetics and she found herself resting her hand on her stomach again. There fear was there, thinking about what she might curse her unborn child with. It didn't even have fingers yet, but there were so many things that could go *wrong*. Depression was hereditary. She figured maybe her mom had used the drugs to try and numb herself from whatever crippling depression she'd had to deal with. But passing that darkness to an innocent child? Was that really fair?

"El? Babe?"

The "babe" had rubbed off on him after spending so many years with Dustin and Max, but she'd found it comforting instead of a cliché.

"Hm?" She blinked back to the conversation.

"What's up? You look... not so okay," he frowned, clearly worried. "Is it the food?"

"No..." She didn't want to talk about her doubts, picking something else vaguely worrying instead. "Just like... childbirth, you know? It's gonna hurt like a bitch."

"You could always have a C-section." He tilted his head. "They'll just numb you up and take it out. I think it's supposed to be easier?"

"And get *another* scar?" She shook her head. "I have... enough of those. No, I'll just... do it the usual way. I guess," she mumbled, looking away. It was awkward and she knew it.

"We can figure that out when we get closer to it, okay? Maybe my mom will have some ideas or something... I mean, she did it three times. She's pretty good at it by now."

He was grinning but she grimaced at his attempt of a joke. Telling his

parents would make it more real and she didn't want to think about it yet. He gave up on trying to cheer her and moved to comforting instead.

"You're going to do fine. You're the strongest person I know, babe. And I'll be there to feed you ice chips and you can yell at me and call me terrible things and I'll totally allow it, no bad feelings," he promised. His eyes softened. "I won't let you be alone, no matter how bad it gets, remember? I'll be there the whole time. I promise."

"Okay," she sighed, still feeling doubtful.

The check came and Mike swiped it up before she could blink, paying in cash and leaving a nice tip. He helped her out of her chair—as if she was too weak to even stand up—and then they walked to the movie theater that was only two blocks away. They did this fairly often, sushi and a movie, as kind of a mini-date. Sometimes he would go all out and take her some place new or really fancy or sign them up for ballroom dancing classes or surprise her with tickets to a ballet he knew she liked.

Ever the romantic.

As they found their seats, she pushed the arm of the seat out of the way and scooted over, letting him wrap his arm around her waist and laying her head on his shoulder. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and she sighed happily.

No matter what happened or what changed, he would always be right there and she let the anxiety fade away, squeezing his hand.

He always squeezed back.

Notes for the Chapter:

like i said, kind of a filler but i'm gonna go as slow as necessary so all the emotions fall into place, and also I wanted more el and max interaction. the next few chapters are on the shorter side but i'm gonna try and get them out more quickly to make up for that.

if it were up to me i'd just skip to the birth but like...

that's just not how it goes lol, there's so much stuff i've had to research so you're all just gonna have to suffer through it like poor el.

next chapter we find out if it's a boy or a girl! guess in the comments, i want to kind of take a poll and see what you all think. see if i picked the the more popular one. ;)

thanks for all the great comment so far. i just... my inbox intimidates the fuck outta me honestly, but i read each and every one and honestly some you guys have me crying and blushing and screaming because of how amazing and sweet you are. i'll never understand what i did to deserve such amazing readers, i seriously love you all.

boy or girl?

-g

6. Look at you go, I just adore you

Notes for the Chapter:

every single one of you voted girl. i won't confirm or deny, i'll just let you read and find out if you're right.

another short chapter, sorry, but i'll update again soon! i promise.

El stared out of the car window, watching the neighborhood pass by. They had ended up keeping Gandalf, but had purchased a white Prius and named it Shadowfax. Usually El drove it since she had the farther commute and it was a gas saver, but Mike liked it too, speeding around town. The main reason he didn't regularly drive it was because it was so damn small, but he could cramp himself inside every now and then.

"You okay?" he asked for the millionth time.

"I'm fine. Just... not sure. About anything."

"Nervous?"

"No. I'm not scared... I just... I don't know. I don't know how I feel."

He didn't press her and it was quiet again, she'd forgotten to put on music, but he flicked on the turn signal and they pulled into the parking lot of the doctor's office. She was at fifteen weeks, almost four months, and they were going in for the regular check up. With a twist.

"Dustin thinks it's a girl too," Mike parked the car. "I'm not saying I'm right buuuut...."

"Mm."

She didn't really want to talk about it, she just wanted to get it over with. Something about finding out what it was and seeing it on the tiny black screen... it was making her anxious. It was weird, how she would get anxious about it all over again. They had already made the

decision to have it and there was no turning back... but she still hadn't quite pictured the end result yet and this would force her to think about it.

"Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler?"

The nurse smiled at them and led them in to one of the rooms. El noticed how the waiting area had been oddly devoid of men and wondered if her husband was the only who insisted on going to every single check up and appointment with her. Why was it so hard for her to do it alone?

She was quiet, letting Mike answer most of the questions and staring off, her hand resting on her stomach that was starting bulge out. It was a small bump so far, easily mistaken for a bit of chub or bloating, but she was hyper aware of it, noticing how it pushed at her shirts and dresses. They would need to go shopping for maternity clothes soon and she wondered if it would be better to bring her husband or her best friend... no, she was definitely bringing Max. Mike would just tell her everything looked good and they would get nowhere.

"Eleven, are you ready, dear?" Her doctor was smiling, a nice older woman who El imagined was a fantastic grandmother. "The jelly is a bit cold."

"It's fine, Dr. Snow, " she said.

She lay back and pulled her shirt up, wincing at the cold sensation. The room filled with a loud sound, a quick staccato, and she saw Mike smile. Dr. Snow was staring intently at the screen, trying to get the picture.

"Well, that's baby's heartbeat, good and strong," she assured them. "And there..." She pointed at the screen. "Is a hand. And some legs. Long legs! Must take after dad there."

El glanced at Mike, who was smiling so widely his face looked like it was going to break, his eyes glued to the screen. He glanced down at her and squeezed her hand and his joy was infectious, the fear melting a bit as he looked at her with eyes full of adoration. She took a deep breath, trying to let herself be happy instead of worrying. It

was healthy and strong. That was good.

Dr. Snow moved the transducer a bit and then nodded, looking at the two of them with a pleased expression.

“Were you wanting to know the sex or did you want to wait?”

“We want to know,” Mike said quickly. “Right, El?”

“Yes,” she agreed quietly.

They had talked about it. Part of her didn’t want to know, didn’t want to let herself get attached to it yet. But Mike was eager, excited to find out everything and pick out paint for the nursery and do all the things expectant parents did. After this, things would start to change. They wouldn’t be able to live normally, people would notice her stomach and ask questions she didn’t have answers too and they would tell his family and they would look at her and expect her to be happy all the time—

“El? Babe? Hey, look at me, you need to breathe,” Mike’s face was suddenly in front of her and she stared into the depths of his inky-brown eyes. “Breathe with me, okay? In, one two three, out, one two three.”

She hadn’t realized she was hyperventilating, but he had, and his hands were holding both of hers, eyes locked like they were the only two people in the world. There was a whoosh as she exhaled, and she followed his prompting, breathing in slowly and then out, feeling the oxygen her body needed filling her lungs. It took a few minutes and when he finally pulled back, Dr. Snow looked concerned.

“Maybe we should wait until next time then?” she asked, eyes wide.

“No.” El shook her head. “I’m okay. I want to know.”

I can’t run away from this forever. Mike wants to know. There’s no reason to be afraid.

Mike’s hand gripped hers tightly and she reminded herself that it would be okay. That she could do this, that he would help her no matter what. The doctor nodded apprehensively and moved the

transducer back onto her stomach, making the tiny blob reappear on screen. Mike's eyes never left El's, despite how much she knew he wanted to look at their child on the screen.

Dr. Snow smiled, shifting a bit, until she could see the telltale sign.

"You have a little boy."

There was a sharp inhale from Mike and he snapped around to look at the screen, eyes huge as he looked back at his wife, and then the screen, and then his wife again. El's panic faded for a moment and she felt a flash of triumph. She had totally been right.

"I knew it," she whispered, a smirk twitching her lips. "I told you."

"I'm not even mad. We're going to have a baby boy, holy fucking shit!" Mike yelled, then covered his mouth. "Sorry, doctor."

Dr. Snow looked amused. "No worries, Michael, you're not the first excited father I've had in my room."

Suddenly El felt kisses all over her face and she giggled, pushing at her husband's shoulder to try and get him to stop. He was being ridiculous and sweet and it helped her to forget the less pleasant feelings.

"Mike!" she protested. "Stop that!"

"Sorry, El, I can't help it. God, I'm going to be a dad. We're going to have a kid. A boy. You're just so amazing and awesome," he kissed her again. "We're going to have a boy, El!"

"Didn't you want a girl?" she raised an eyebrow.

"I just *thought* it was a girl. And I mean... I was kind of thinking that calling you two 'my girls' sounded kinda nice, but I mean—" He was grinning again. "Now we're going to have a little boy and that's just the greatest thing I've ever heard."

"Maybe," Dr. Snow cut in, "the next one could be a girl?"

There was an awkward pause as Mike and El exchanged a look. She

couldn't pretend like she didn't see the hope that flashed into his eyes, but there was no way she could do this a second time. The whole thing wasn't supposed to happen... there was no way it could happen again.

Mike cleared his throat.

"I think we'll be happy with the one. And he'll have to bring home a girl eventually, so we'll get a daughter someday, right El?" He was grinning again.

"Um, yeah."

She hadn't thought that far ahead, she was barely able to think about the next few months, but she supposed he was right. Whoever he was or whatever he became, she hoped he would find someone who could love him like she loved Mike. Everyone deserved that, especially her son.

Her *son*. She was going to have a son.

The rest of the visit was a blur, she was in too much of a daze to notice anything, nodding and answering questions when Mike prompted but otherwise staring off. Somehow it was coming together, the future that she was still hesitant to imagine. A tiny boy with black shaggy hair and freckles, a smaller version of the man she loved with all of her heart.

She had thought it was impossible to understand what he had been talking about, about wanting to love more. About wanting to love more of her and how this baby would be that, a piece of both of them. She rested her hand over the small swell of her stomach, closing her eyes and letting her heart open up, let the tiny being squeeze it's way inside.

The fear faded, just for a moment. Just enough to let her smile.

"Mike?"

"Hm?" He didn't look over, too busy trying to navigate traffic.

"I understand."

“Understand what, babe?”

“About loving more of you. About him being... more.”

They pulled up to a stoplight and he looked over at her, a bit stunned. Then a grin cracked his face.

“So you think you might be okay with him? Our boy?” His eyes dropped to her stomach. “You think we made the right choice?”

She reached out and touched his face, tilting his chin so their eyes met, her gaze full of all the love and adoration that was suddenly pouring out of her soul. The uncertainty faded—though she knew the anxiety would come back—and she let herself smile, let herself feel every single heartbeat and breath. Let the love surround her again.

There was no hesitation as she nodded, brushing his cheekbone with her fingers.

“Yes.”

Notes for the Chapter:

i wrote this chapter two weeks ago and honestly, i'm kind of nervous some of you will be upset i picked a boy! i always kind of imagined them with a girl too, but this mike and el is a little different from canon mike and el so i thought a boy was a better choice. mike is going to love this baby no matter what it is, let's be honest, but i think having a boy, one who reminds el of mike—because she loves him more than anything—is helpful in her kind of fully accepting it.

anyways if you hate it or disagree, you can let me know, but that was my reasoning and i spent a good amount of time thinking about it so it wasn't just me tossing a coin. i don't think it'll ruin the rest of the story lol.

new chapter tomorrow! keep your eyes peeled.

7. It's warmer where you are

“Oh!”

The plate slipped between her fingers, bouncing off the edge of the sink and onto the floor. It shattered with a loud *crash!* but she hardly noticed, staring down at her stomach instead.

She had reached her third trimester, her stomach bulging out far enough in front of her that she had to stand a few inches farther back from the sink than usual, her belly too big to let her closer. Her pants didn't fit and she and Max had gone on a few shopping trips to get shirts and elastic-waisted jeans. Leggings were her favorite, with tunics and flowy dresses that didn't make her feel like she was constrained. It was what she was wearing now.

“El?! Is everything okay?” Mike was there in an instant, looking worried. “Do you feel alright?”

“I'm fine,” she assured him. “I just—oh!”

Her hand went down, midway on her belly, and she stared down as she felt the tiny flutter again, just a whisper. It felt like holding a butterfly in your cupped hands, the wings beating softly against your palms.

It was *him*.

“What? What is it? Are you in pain?”

El looked up at her husband, whose eyes were wide with concern, and let herself smile, reaching out to grab his hand. She set it on her stomach, pressing it firmly against the spot, waiting, willing the tiny life to do it again for his father. It happened but it was less of a flutter and more of straight up *poke*, a tiny kick. Mike gasped.

“Is that...?”

“He's saying hi,” she grinned, enjoying the wonder on her husband's face. “I've felt some little movements before but this is—oh!” She looked down at her stomach. “I guess he's finally waking up...”

"He's amazing." Mike was mesmerized, staring down at where his hand rested as tears started to well up in his eyes. "You're amazing too. I can't believe—"

"You better believe it, Dad. It's your kid."

"*Our* kid, El." He corrected, then suddenly frowned in thought. "Should we like, pick a name or something? We've only got a few months to go now. I've kind of been thinking about it but—"

"I have a name... but it's kind of dumb," she confessed.

She'd been thinking about it a lot, what legacy she would give their child. All the names she'd heard, of people she loved, of people who loved her. Characters in stories that helped her get through tough times. Especially one of the stories that had helped bring them together. A series they still read almost every year.

But that was the first name, his middle initial was set in her mind.

"I think his middle name should be Michael," she nodded, sure of that one, before glancing up again at Mike. "I want him to be like you, Mike. He's already got part of you, but I want him to always be reminded of his dad, because without you he wouldn't... I would have—" she choked on the words.

"Hey, shhh, it's okay. You didn't make that choice, and even if you had, I would still love you. I'm just really glad you didn't," he admitted. "I'm glad that it wasn't what was best for us."

There was a moment as he closed his eyes and thanked every force in the universe for helping her to not make that choice. A breath as he remembered what he could have lost. El sniffed, trying to calm her own emotions.

"So I want him to be like you, more like you than me," she blustered on after wiping her eyes. "I want him to have your name."

"I like it, El. I'm okay with that. I mean, I don't think *I* could have suggested that, but if it's what you want..." He kissed her forehead. "I want him to be like you too. I want him to have your strength and your ability to grow, to always try to be more."

"I learned that from you," she whispered.

"But you're better at it than I am. I'm still kind of afraid of heights. You *married* me."

It wasn't that she was better at defeating her fears, but that she'd had more to overcome. He had showed her how to do that, all those years ago. And she never stopped, even though the anxiety and sadness always came back. She never stopped fighting. Part of her knew that but it was still his first revelation on the rooftop that had really helped her realize that she needed to stop running from her fears and start confronting them. And his pep talk outside of the room of dead kittens that had helped her realize that her sadness and fears were valid, but that she couldn't keep letting them make her a victim. He had reminded her that she could be strong and she had seized that strength with both hands.

He helped her see more clearly.

His hope and optimistic outlook for how they could be as parents had helped her see a future brighter than the one she'd imagined. To her, having a child had seemed like the ending. But he had showed her how it could be the start of something new instead. It had been *her* choice, always, but it had been his vision and support and encouragement that had made her believe it was possible.

And now she was here, standing in the kitchen of her house with her husband talking about names for her son.

"Did you have a first name? I was thinking about it but I'm not sure. I don't really want to name him after my dad and we can't name him Dustin, Lucas, or Will without starting a fight so those are out..."

"Do you remember the first thing we really talked about? After the double date, I mean?"

"Um... waffles?"

She grinned but shook her head. "No, I mean... our favorite thing. The thing we both geeked out over? The thing that covers the office with action figures and calendars and other various overpriced

memorabilia?”

“Oh, Lord of the Rings. Easy. Still my favorite.” His brows flew up his forehead as he realized what she was implying. “You don’t want to name Bilbo, do you?”

“No!” She laughed. “That’s ridiculous. I don’t want him to get teased all his life, come on, Mike. Be more realistic.”

Mike sighed. “So does that mean Elrond is out too?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then what exactly were you thinking? Why bring up Lord of the Rings?”

El looked down, fussing with the edge of her apron and suddenly feeling stupid. It was a dumb idea, why would they name their kid after a fictional character? Maybe they could name him after someone else, some historical figure or something...

“It’s... dumb, nevermind,” she muttered. “I’ll think of something else.”

“No, hey, come on!” Mike grabbed her hands and tugged. “You can tell me and I’ll be the one to decide if it’s dumb.”

“Sam,” she blurted. “I mean, it’s a pretty normal name? Most people will just think it’s short for Samuel, but really it’s short for—”

“Samwise. Samwise the Brave.” A grin slowly spread across his face.

El wrinkled her nose. “Well, Samwise the Stout Hearted in the book, but yeah. Is that totally stupid? I just think if this baby is anything like me... he’s going to need to have a strong heart. He’ll need to be brave.”

Samwise Gamgee had always been one of her favorite characters, especially in the movies. His belief in the good of the world and his undying loyalty were things she had always admired, things she had seen in her husband. Things she wanted her son to have.

Mike didn't seem to think the idea was dumb, smiling softly at her clever thinking. It fit, in his mind, and he said the name out loud.

"Sam Michael Wheeler," he ruminated on the name. "That's really not bad at all."

His hand reached out again, resting on her stomach, and there was a sharp, sudden kick, as if the tiny human being that was growing there approved of his name. El looked at her husband in surprise and then they both laughed.

"I guess that settles it. Sammy likes it."

"Sammy?" El quirked a brow. "Already with the nickname?"

"No?"

"Mmm. Maybe. We can let him decide that one."

Mike grinned and then pulled her close, her belly pressed between the two of them, feeling the tiny flutter within. It was the first time they'd really felt it. Like they were a family.

It made her scared all over again.

Her fingers grasped onto her shirt as the wave of anxiety she'd been ignoring suddenly flooded in. It was easy to live in the fantasy, to pretend like everything was going to be amazing, but not even her therapist could make the fear go all the way away. She had realized that she was okay with having this baby, with letting it live inside of her and feeling it grow. But what would happen when he reached the outside world?

"Mike, how are we supposed to keep him safe?" Her lungs flooded with panic, making it hard to breathe. "This world fucking sucks and he's going to have to grow up in it and—"

"Hey." His voice was firm. "He's not going to be the only one growing up, okay? We're going to help him, so he has what he needs and he knows he's loved. That's the most we *can* do. Why isn't that enough?"

“B-Because I’m—”

“What? Because you’re *trying*? Because you decided to keep him and love him and let him grow up at all?” Mike shook his head. “You can’t be afraid to make mistakes, El. That’s how we’ll learn. He’ll understand that.” His eyes softened, his hands gently rubbing her back. “And we know the things not to do, what our parents did? That helps. So don’t be afraid of what we can’t control, just be happy he’s healthy and growing.”

He held her tight, almost too tight, breathing in her scent. It was softer now, like the baby inside of her was making it more powdery and sweet. His breath tickled her forehead and he kissed her there, over and over.

“You’re doing so well, babe. You’re doing amazing.” Another kiss. “I know sometimes it seems scary but I’m so proud of you and I love you so much.”

It was what she needed to hear and she buried her face in the front of his soft, white t-shirt, letting it dry her tears and ease her fears. She knew that she wouldn’t be able to do this without him, any of it, and felt herself feeling grateful for him and his endless amount of patience.

“How do you never get tired of me?” she whispered. “I’m exhausting.”

“Nah, you just need to be reminded that you’re amazing and that I love you. I know that.”

Her heart swelled again. “You’re going to be... *such* a good dad,” she breathed, warm against his shirt. “Even if I suck, at least he’ll have you.”

“You’re not going to suck. You’re going to be... rad.”

She clung to his shirt, closing her eyes, letting his optimism glow inside of her, trying to pretend like she wasn’t afraid again.

“I hope so.”

Notes for the Chapter:

it was another short one, but we got a name! it's a partial hat tip to sean astin for playing my favorite hobbit, but considering how much LotR brought them together in the first story and how much they both love it... it felt right. idk what canon mike and el would do, honestly, but for my mike and el this is what's right.

i'm still a little worried some of you are mad for me picking boy? i didn't pick it because you all guessed girl, like i said, i wrote that chapter and decided weeks ago but i was just curious what you all wanted. it wasn't really a vote so much as a poll because i was curious.

um... i hope you all still like this story! next chapter someone we all love shows up to help out with the nursery and it's one of my favorite chapters i've written.

hope you all can hold until the birth lol.

-g

8. There is no end to what we can do together

“Will!”

El’s eyes widened as she opened the door and she felt a genuine smile stretch across her face.

“What are you doing here?”

She was hugging their friend within two seconds, her huge, bulging stomach making it hard but not caring because it was Will and he was there and she had missed him. He’d been living in New York with his brother since he graduated, building a reputation and a clientele who purchased his art. Jonathan focused on photography and Will on paintings, and together they ran one of the more successful galleries. He had kept his quiet, soft-spoken nature despite the bustle and loudness of the big city, skyping every now and then to talk.

And somehow he was standing in front of her, matching her smile, eyes dancing.

“I heard you had a nursery that needed painting?” He raised an eyebrow, glancing down at her belly. “Something for Little Will?”

El laughed at that. “Sorry, we knew better than to name him after any of you and start a new World War. And Will-Dustin-Lucas just seems a little excessive for one kid.”

“That’s fair,” he wasn’t offended, hefting up his suitcases. “I thought I’d stay for a few days, if that’s okay with you?”

“Of course! We had to move the guest room to the basement, but it’s kind of nice since you’ll have your own bathroom...”

She led him down to their cozy basement, where the TV and den were and two more bedrooms, one of which was their at home office and the other the new guest room. The office was more of Mike’s than El’s, since he graded papers and did finances on the broad wooden desk when he was home, but they had been talking about

turning it into another guest room if necessary.

Opening the door, she flicked on the light, showing Will the queen bed and dresser for his stuff, chatting about his work in New York as he unpacked. One bag of clothes and toiletries, the bigger one full of art supplies and brushes.

“I hope you don’t mind that I kind of just showed up. I had been planning on visiting last month but we had a new show at the gallery and I just didn’t make it until now,” Will apologized, shrugging and tugging at his plaid shirt. “I could have called...”

“You’re always welcome, Will. You know that.”

Out of Mike’s three friends, El was closest to Will. He’d always been there to lend a ear and offer good advice through the years, not to mention calling Mike at the gala back when she’d almost given up and let herself go back to that hellish estate. She owed him a lot and in some ways considered him a brother, their similar looks—honey-brown hair and hazel eyes—causing people to ask. Sometimes they said yes, just to mess with them.

“I seriously could call though.” His eyes dropped down to her stomach again. “Maybe keep up with you guys a little better.”

They’d only told Mike’s friends and family after the fifth month, when it was impossible to pretend like she was anything other than pregnant. His mom had lost her mind—not unexpected—and Lucas and Will had been surprised but pleased for their friends. She hadn’t wanted to send out announcements or anything, choosing to call their loved ones and tell them personally. Mostly Mike had called. El hadn’t been able to pretend she was as excited.

She reached down and rubbed her belly, feeling what she could only describe as a “whoosh” as the baby inside shifted, tickling her insides. Sleeping sucked, and her back hurt a lot, but Mike lovingly massaged her muscles and bought one of those ridiculous pregnancy pillows to help, which had actually been a miracle. He kept his promises.

“Nothing too crazy has been happening. I mean, other than the

baby,” she smirked. “It’s starting to feel real and sometimes I just...” she shivered, feeling the tinge of fear that never fully faded from the edges. “I can’t always pretend like I’m some happy expectant mother. Somedays I just want to sleep and never wake up.”

If it had been anyone other than Will, she would have felt like she was dumping, but he just nodded, eyes kind and understanding.

“You don’t have to pretend, El. You can still have bad days. Babies don’t magically make everything better... sometimes they make things worse,” he shrugged like it was no big deal. “When my mom found out she was pregnant with me she cried for three weeks and didn’t get out of bed either. She was hardcore depressed.”

“*What?*” El felt her mouth drop open.

She had met Joyce Byers at her wedding and immediately fell in love with the small, scrappy woman who had hugged her like she’d known her all her life. Sometimes her friend’s mother would call her and check in, like she knew that El needed a maternal presence in her life that was a little more gentle than Karen Wheeler.

El couldn’t imagine Joyce being anything but excited about Will, who she supported and loved with a fierce motherly affection El imagined only rivaled a mother bear’s.

“Yeah, she had been planning to get away from my dad. She was going to take Jonathan and just leave because she couldn’t take it. But then she found out she was pregnant and she knew she couldn’t support herself and him *and* another baby on her own. So she stayed so she could have me but...” he sighed, looking a bit sad, not for himself but for what his mother had endured. “She was so depressed she didn’t move for weeks. Jonathan said he remembers because he tried to make her breakfast. Burnt the toast and spilled the milk. He was four. But he took her this terrible breakfast and she looked at him and realized that laying around wouldn’t fix anything. And that even though she had a shitty husband, she had her kids and she loved them enough to want to keep trying. So she got up and fed her kid and then went back to work. She told me it was one of the things that helped her kick Lonnie out, wanting us both to have a better life.”

He ended the story with a nonchalant shrug, like it wasn't one of the most heartbreaking things El had ever heard. But Will could tell that she needed to hear it, to know she wasn't the first one with doubts. That even he—who was undoubtedly one of the most loved people she knew—had been unwanted at one point. And he'd still grown up and turned out okay.

"Wow," she breathed. "Your mom is super... rad."

"She is. And she messed up a lot, but she still tried her hardest and I love her more than anyone," he shrugged again. "I kind of feel like you're going to be like that."

Tears filled her eyes—part emotion, part hormones—and then she was sitting next to him on the bed as he gently rubbed her shoulders. That was the thing about Will, he always knew what to say and what you needed to hear even when you didn't. She wiped her eyes, feeling stupid like she always did about crying over something nice.

"S-Sorry. That happens a lot now."

"I bet." He smirked knowingly.

"I just... the anxiety doesn't help, but I just worry so much. How I'm going to take care of him and help him when I'm such a mess. If I made the right choice—no," she frowned at herself, shaking her head. "I'm glad I didn't get an abortion. I know that. But I'm scared that making him deal with me is just... so unfair."

"El, you're being too hard on yourself."

"That's what Mike says," she sighed.

"Well, I mean, he's usually right when he's not angry," Will grinned. "That's why he was the president of all of our clubs and the Dungeon Master. He's pretty good at figuring things out."

She nodded, deciding he was right as usual. Mike's logical mind was the source of most of his answers, but he was easily influenced by his emotions. Hearing it come from Will made it easier to believe somehow, his neutral point of view and wisdom beyond his years a slightly more reliable source than her husband.

He stood, offering her a hand.

“How about you show me this nursery so we can start planning the mural? I’m here until Thursday, but I think five days will be enough time depending on what you want,” he explained.

She took his hand and let him help her upright, grabbing her belly and huffing a bit. It made it harder, that was for sure, and sometimes she sat on the toilet for obscene amounts of time, just trying to find the motivation to stand up.

“We painted the other three walls. It’s kind of greyscale tone, but on the lighter side because Mike read that darkly painted rooms can cause nightmares...”

Mike had read a lot of things, some of which were useful and some that were just stupid. He had tried to put headphones on her stomach one time, so Sam could listen to Mozart in the womb, and she’d nearly slapped his face off. But she let him read to him, and sing sometimes too, their doctor agreeing that it didn’t hurt and that the baby could hear things. She wanted him to know his father’s voice.

It took her a little longer to get up the stairs and she rested for a moment at the top before showing Will to the bedroom that was right next to their master bedroom. It was cozy and neat, the crib set up and a rocking chair in the corner. The walls were two-toned grey stripes, the crib white, with emerald and deep purple bedding. That had been the theme, thanks to Karen, and most things in the room were purple, green, or grey. Except for the giant blank wall.

Will looked pleased, touching it carefully.

“Wow, you guys primed it and everything?” he smiled.

“When an award-winning artist offers to paint a mural in your kid’s bedroom for free, you kind of try to make it easier,” she teased. “And I do remember some things from my art classes.”

“Thank god somebody did.” He took a step back, staring at the wall. “So... what were you thinking? Like a jungle or underwater or...?”

“Dinosaurs,” El sighed, not sounding super excited.

That had been Mike, but it hadn't been intentional. Apparently he'd been out shopping for a wedding gift for one of his co-workers and stumbled across a four foot tall, neon blue and green, stuffed Tyrannosaurus Rex. Somehow—though El knew exactly how—it had ended up sitting in the corner of the nursery, the bright colors matching the room. After that it had been dinosaur *everything*, joining “Rory”, the neon T. Rex.

In retrospect, it was pretty fun theme and less expected than just “boy colors”. And girls liked dinosaurs too, so if for some reason they were wrong, the kid would still have a cool room.

There was a sharp jab inside of her and El winced, walking over to the rocking chair and sitting down as the tiny person in her belly kicked and shifted. He had gone from a small flutter to a painful stab, more active, said Dr. Snow, than most of the babies she looked at. Will noticed.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, he's just a little asshole sometimes. *Apparently*,” El rolled her eyes, “he has Mike's legs which means he's a bit crammed in there and he likes to let me know.”

“Kicking?”

“More like Irish Step Dancing, but yeah. You want to feel?” People had a weird habit of touching her belly without asking, but letting her friend feel didn't seem weird. “He won't stop now that he's started.”

“Um...” Will looked nervous. “It's okay.”

“Nah, come on.”

He tentatively walked over and she positioned his hand on her stomach. Sam kicked, *hard*, and El winced again, glaring down and silently telling him to *cut it out, kiddo, you don't want to piss me off before you've even been born*. She looked up, noticing how Will had gone from seeming uncomfortable to lighting up in wonder, shifting his hand as the tiny foot pounded against the inside of her.

“That’s... wow.”

“It’s less wow when it’s four in the morning and he decides to bounce against my lungs,” she sighed, rubbing her belly. “It almost makes me regret it. I miss being able to just pop an Advil anytime my stomach hurt. Now I have to deal with this whenever the brat decides to act up.”

She called him a brat a lot. Or “tiny asshole”, “this little shit”, a whole slew of rather abrasive nicknames depending on how much he prodded her bladder or hiccuped inside of her, making it impossible to sleep or eat or think about anything that wasn’t her body and how uncomfortable she was. At first Mike had been worried that she was angry or resentful, but he’d realized she said it in the same tone when she called him “a hopeless nerd boy” or “a huge fucking dork”, the worry draining away.

It meant she *liked* him. Most of the time.

“Do you hate it?” Will asked and she once again found herself being honest.

“Sometimes,” she admitted quietly. “Sometimes I want to take it back just so I feel like I have control again. But... I’m glad he’s strong enough to kick and that it means we’re getting closer to having him out.” She winced again. “Which is also something I’m not looking forward to, I mean the mess and the pushing and... ugh.”

She wasn’t sure if actually being pregnant was going to be the worst part, or if having the baby would make it easier. As someone who’d never actually wanted to get pregnant, she was looking forward to getting him out and never doing it again. Mike had helped her be less disgusted and frightened by the lack of bodily control, but she still couldn’t pretend like she enjoyed it all of the time.

Will’s voice broke her from her thoughts.

“I always wanted to be a dad,” he said quietly. “I thought having a kid someday would be really... fulfilling, getting to take care of someone and watch them grow? I was just hoping to find someone to share it with me, y’know?” He shook his head. “Maybe it’s just not

something I'm supposed to do."

"You could adopt," she said helpfully.

Will snorted. "That's kind of my only option, El."

"No, I mean—" she eased back. "You could be a single parent if you wanted. I know *I* could never but if you actually want a kid... go for it. You'd be a good dad, even if you didn't have someone to share it with."

Instead of being offended, he seemed to take her suggestion into account.

"I'd have to sell my half of the gallery to Jonathan and move if I did that. NYC isn't exactly... I mean, I'd rather move back to Hawkins if I had a kid," Will looked thoughtful, pushing his hands into his pockets. "Be near my mom and stuff... maybe, I don't know."

"You're only twenty-eight, Will, you don't have to rush," she assured him.

She got the feeling that was something he hadn't really told anyone before. It made her feel a little guilty, knowing that someone else wanted a child while she was still reluctant about the one currently inside of her.

"And you're welcome to visit any time and see our own little bundle of joy," she said quietly. "I'm sure we're going to need the help. If that helps you decide... I'm okay with it."

Will blinked at her and nodded, understanding what she meant and looking away shyly, feeling grateful that she was willing to let him be part of such an intimate process. Clearing his throat, he walked back to the wall, measuring angles and staring, pulling a sketchbook out of his bag and sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"So, you want dinosaurs? Maybe like a volcano in one corner and a couple of different kinds?" he sketched as he talked. "A herd of *Diplodocus* in the treeline and a *T. Rex* in the corner? Do you want *Triceratops* or like, *Chasmosaurus*? Maybe some *Hadrosaurs*?"

He looked over his shoulder at El, who was staring at him blankly.

“Will, I don’t know what half of those are. I didn’t see Jurassic Park until I was twenty, okay? If you want specifics, you can ask Mike, but just nothing too... scary looking. I’m going to have to sit in here a lot,” she sighed. “You nerd boys and your massive expanses of knowledge about random things...”

“Dinosaurs are cool. Most kids like dinosaurs. Did you not like dinosaurs?”

“I *liked* them, I just didn’t have an entire room themed to them. You can do what you think is best, I trust you, but I don’t want a Triceratops giving me googly eyes while I’m trying to feed my screaming infant.”

Will laughed outright at the image she conjured, shaking his head as he finished sketching, a super basic outline of what he wanted to do. It was mostly shapes but he showed her how there would be some green trees on one side and the volcano on the other, the ground mostly lava rock and dirt because apparently there wasn’t much grass during the time of the dinosaurs. El nodded, agreeing the layout was good.

They chatted for the next hour as he started blocking out shapes on the wall, talking about different people he’d met out in New York. How Jeff Goldblum had commissioned a painting for his kitchen, and had introduced him to some of the agents in LA. El talked about a few of her clients, without naming names of course, mentioning how she recently had a girl with bulimia finish recovery and move on to a different therapist. Not all of her cases ended happily, but El knew she was making a difference and that was what pushed her on.

She didn’t notice how much time had passed until she heard the front door squeak, sitting up a bit but unable to stand all the way before her husband appeared in the doorway. He looked confused, not seeing his friend at first.

“There’s a car in the—Will!” His whole face lit up. “I didn’t know you were coming?”

“It was kind of unexpected, hope you don’t mind,” Will grinned.

The two men hugged, slapping each other on the back, and then immediately began talking about... everything. El watched, amused, as they gestured and grinned, knowing Mike had missed his friend even more than she had. They had been best friends since kindergarten and Mike was always excited to hear about what his friend was doing. Will showed him the sketch of the dinosaurs after a few minutes.

“Ooh! Hadrosaurs are classic, and... is that a Chasmosaurus?”

“I thought it was a little more jazzy than just a basic Triceratops,” Will grinned.

El rolled her eyes at the nerdy boys, deciding to get up and head to the kitchen to start dinner. She hadn’t quit her job, but she had transferred a few of her clients over to other therapists so that they would have someone when she was gone for several months. The better ones, the ones who had less severe issues, she continued to treat, knowing they could deal with it if she was gone. They were her kids, in some ways, and she was proud of them for doing better. But heaven knew she needed a break.

It took her a second to realize she wasn’t getting out of the chair without a little help and she sighed loudly.

“Mike?”

“Hm?” He looked over.

“Can you help me up?”

He was in front of her instantly, holding her hands and helping her stand, before pulling her towards him and kissing her cheek. He was still in his slacks and dress shirt, and she tugged his tie playfully before letting him go and heading for the kitchen.

Will watched them, his eyes drifting over to Mike after she left the room.

“How’s she doing?” He knew what she had told him, but he was still

a little worried.

“Better than I thought. It freaks her out a lot, but sometimes I catch her just rubbing her stomach and smiling,” Mike grinned at the memory but then sighed. “It’s rare, but for the most part she’s okay. And when she’s not... we just wait until she is again.”

“Is she still on her meds?”

“We had to switch after the baby, the one she was on wasn’t... safe. I think the new one is okay,” he sighed again. “Sometimes it’s hard to tell, but for the most part she’s honest when I ask and I think she’ll be okay.”

Will nodded thoughtfully, feeling a little less worried. He was the only one—other than Max and Dustin, of course—who knew about El wanting to get rid of it at first. After her ordeal back in college he’d tried to pay better attention, tried to be more adamant about getting her to talk when she needed it.

“That’s good. I’m happy for you guys,” he smiled truthfully. “I never imagined you’d be the first one of us to have a kid.”

“We were all betting on Dustin, let’s be real,” Mike agreed. “But they said they want to wait until they’re thirty and keep enjoying their twenties so...” He shrugged. “Accidents happen though.”

Will nodded, having heard that too. It was a fair plan, have fun and then get serious when the kids start arriving. God only knew when Lucas would decide to settle down. Maybe he would end up being the kidless one, but after this pregnancy, no one was ready to make bets.

There was a crash from the kitchen followed by some rather intense swearing and Mike turned, eyes wide, alarmed.

“I might need to go help her with dinner. Do you like stir-fry?” Mike asked.

“Love it. I’ll make dinner tomorrow if you guys want, I have this killer pasta recipe from one of the Italian bistros down the street from my apartment.”

“That sounds amazing, I’ll tell El.”

Will watched his friend leave the room, grinning happily, and felt himself smiling too, thinking about the room he was in and all the potential it held. After a moment of staring at the blank wall, he shook himself out of it, reaching down to grab a paintbrush and one of the cans of paint.

No better time to start than now.

Notes for the Chapter:

i feel bad now because some of you wanted the baby shower but i literally never intended to write the baby shower and honestly i'm still not going to write it because i have zero dialogue for it. sorry. :C i'll allude to it later but quite honestly, i don't want to write it, it sounds exhausting lol.

i love will. i love will so much. ahhhh i just love him.

this fic has been so fluffy so next chapter is going to be... interesting. i'm excited and i've almost finished writing the whole thing so that's nice. then i'm gonna focus back on that other AU i started that people seem really interested in?? anyways that's the plan so i'm going to try and keep updating daily unless i catch up with myself but hopefully not.

i hope you all have a lovely new year's! i'm gonna stay home with the bottle of tequila i got for christmas and pass out watching brooklyn nine-nine because it's going to be negative degrees outside and i'm not going out lol. do you guys have any fun plans?

-g

9. I'm trying, to let you know just how much you mean to me

Notes for the Chapter:

i've read so many blogs and listened to so many stories about childbirth you guys. i know more than i wanted to know. all for the sake of this story... because i have to be reALISTIC. god. fuck me.

i'm never having kids lol.

Mike sighed and sat back, staring at the laptop screen in front of him. El was snoring softly next to him, her face lit up by the soft glow of the screen, her arms wrapped around the pregnancy pillow he'd bought her. It was supposed to cradle the stomach and cushion the neck, relieving pressure, and though she laughed at him at first, now she slept with it all the time. He'd almost been butthurt that she preferred to cuddle the pillow over him, but he also knew that when they did cuddle it was really awkward because of how far her stomach bulged.

They had a week and a half to go until her due date and she was *huge*. Mike thought she was honestly adorable, waddling around the house in her slippers and robe, huffing and groaning. That night she had dropped her toothbrush and hadn't been able to pick it up which had made her cry rather hysterically—thank you, hormones—and he had accidentally made it worse by laughing because damn it, she was just so *cute*.

She sighed heavily in her sleep and shifted a bit. He was always careful to not wake her since it took her so long to fall asleep in her uncomfortable state. And once the little guy in her stomach decided it was wakeup time, she was up for good.

Glancing back at his laptop, he felt himself grin.

He had been working on two things: his thesis for his doctorate, and the adventure story he'd started back in college all those years ago, about the kids who get sucked into their game board. It had evolved

since then, and he'd kind of let El forget about it too, but he always kept at it, wanting to be able to say one day that he had finished it.

One of the English Professors at the university had offered to be his guinea pig, having published several books herself, and even offered to give him her agent's number. He really felt like it was going to *be* something... but he wanted it to be a surprise for El.

And he had finished it. Just now, at two in the morning on a weeknight in the middle of June, he had finished it. It almost felt too calm, like something should be happening, something big and exciting and—

“Mike?”

El's eyes were open wide and he looked over in surprise, not expecting her to have woken up so suddenly. The usual sleepy haziness that covered her was gone and she looked oddly alert, immediately putting all of his instincts on edge.

“El? Is everything okay?” He closed his laptop and put it on the side table. “Are you alright?”

“I just...” she winced. “I think it might... I think I might be in labor.”

She said it so flatly he almost didn't understand the words. And then it hit him and he almost jumped out of bed.

“Oh my god, are you sure? Like for real, it's not just Braxton-Hicks contractions?” His eyes were saucers and she snorted at him.

“Well, I felt some cramping earlier but I thought it was just gas... I've had the shits for like a week and a half,” she shrugged. “But now it's like... *ow*.”

She winced, reaching down, and Mike felt his heart rate skyrocket. It was happening. She was going to have their baby. In mere hours he would get to meet his son. He rocketed out of the bed, running to the closet to put on some pants, suddenly frantic.

“Shit, we have to go, I'll call my parents when we get there—did you want to call Max?—oh and fuck, where's the go-bag I thought we put

it in here—”

“*Mike*,” her voice was tired. “You need to calm down.”

“Not possible, El. You’re in fucking *labor*!”

“And it takes hours, so why don’t you come back to bed?” She winced again, checking the clock, timing the contractions. “They’re still far apart. I want to stay home as long as possible okay?”

“But... but...”

He stared at her, feeling like he was ready to run to the hospital on foot if necessary. How was it not a big deal? How was she so calm?

“What if something goes wrong, El?” He felt frantic. “We need to get you there so they can help—”

“I’m fine, Mike, I’m just tired. We can sleep for a few hours and then if the contractions are worse I’ll let you drive me to the hospital.” She patted his pillow, pulling the blankets up over her shoulders and smirked. “Come back to bed, husband, I need a backrub.”

The appearance of her sense of humor meant she wasn’t actually in that much pain and he reluctantly took off his one sneaker he’d jammed on to the wrong foot. All of the information he’d read the past few months came back to him and he realized she was right, he didn’t need to be worried yet.

“How far apart are they?” He eased back into the bed.

“Like, fifteen, twenty minutes?” She rolled over, grabbing that damn pillow. “And they’re only for ten seconds. I’m good for a bit. Other than the backrub. They’re in my lower back and it hurts like a bitch.”

“Did your water break?” He couldn’t help but worry. “Are you dilated? What about your mucus plug?”

“If you say the words ‘mucus plug’ again I’m gonna punch you in the face and make you sleep on the couch,” she growled. “Seriously, calm the fuck down.”

He quieted, realizing he was being obnoxious and not helpful, reaching over and sliding her pajama tank top up. Massages were easy and he had big hands so he was good at it, carefully working the muscles in her mid and lower back, listening as she sighed in relief.

“You’re calm, El,” he realized. “That’s awesome... I was kind of thinking you’d freak out.”

“Well *one* of us has to be reasonable right now. And honestly, I’ve been ready for him to come out for weeks now. I pee when I sneeze and the heartburn is killing me. The second we get to the hospital, I’m getting an epidural and shoving this little asshole out of me for good.” She sighed. “I thought I would be anxious too, but honestly—right now—I’m just ready.”

“That’s... good.”

It was quiet as he rubbed her back and suddenly he felt her muscles tense and she groaned softly as another contraction rippled through her. After a few seconds she relaxed again, hugging the pillow tighter.

“You can stop now. But I wouldn’t mind it if you cuddled me,” she said quietly. “We can sleep a bit longer.”

“If that’s what you want.”

He let his arm drape around her waist and then laid down, spooning her cozily and gently rubbing her belly. It must have been the perfect thing to do because she almost groaned in relief, leaning back against him like he was better than the pillow. His mind was racing, too excited to feel sleepy, but he felt her start to relax, grunting through another contraction before falling asleep in his arms.

The next few hours passed painstakingly slowly, but he didn’t let her go, occasionally kissing the back of her head after he felt a contraction pass. He was silently counting, feeling them get closer and closer, lasting longer. But she stayed asleep and he let her rest, knowing she’d need her strength over the next few hours.

She jolted awake in his arms, groaning, her muscles tense, and after

about thirty seconds she relaxed again, gasping.

“El? You, uh, think you’re ready to go to the hospital now?” He didn’t want to pester her but he was suddenly *very* concerned.

“Okay,” she agreed quietly, panting lightly.

It took him five minutes to get himself dressed and to throw the bag into the car as she stayed in bed. When he came to help her get to the car, her face was pinched and she was gasping, clearly in obvious pain.

“El, hey, breathe with me.” He puffed his breath in and out. “Just like we learned, remember that? All those classes we took?”

She did, and after a few seconds the contraction eased and she whimpered, falling against him. Getting to the car took longer, they had to stop for another contraction in the hallway, and by the time she was sitting in Gandalf’s front seat, she was starting to look scared.

She stayed quiet, other than panting, and he wished he could find words to comfort her but he just wanted to get them to the damn hospital so the professionals could figure it out. He went ten over the speed limit but thankfully the cops were all sleeping or on break and he made it to their destination in ten minutes instead of twenty. It was early, a little after five in the morning, and then sun was just starting to tinge the sky a soft pink. If he hadn’t been freaking out, he would have thought it was pretty, but the only thought in his head was *El, baby, hospital, doctor*, repeating in that order over and over.

She clung to him as they walked in, her knuckles white, a soft whimper leaving her throat as she trembled, his grip the only thing keeping her upright. The nurse at the front knew exactly what was going on before they even said anything and quickly put El in a wheelchair, taking her to one of the empty birthing rooms.

She was an older woman, with a smiley face on her nametag that read “Flo”, looking between the two terrified faces in front of her and suppressing a chuckle.

“Is this your first one?” she asked as she helped settle onto the bed.

“This is our *only* one,” El growled, unamused.

Mike tried to smile. “Yeah, uh, this is kind of new for us. Do we just wait...?”

“I’ve called your doctor, Dr. Snow? But for now we’ll have one of our docs do an examination and see how close you are, dearie,” she was talking more to El than Mike. “How far apart are the contractions?”

“Three minutes, and they’re about thirty seconds,” Mike answered quickly. “That’s good, right?”

Flo turned and gave him a look that said “You need to take it down a notch”, but nodded agreeably.

“It means she’s getting closer. The doctor will be here soon.”

She left and after that a flurry of things started happening. El was changed into a gown and given an IV, tucked into the hospital bed while Mike sat next to her and worried at his lip. The exam didn’t take long and the doctor nodded, seeming unconcerned.

“You’re about three inches dilated, which is a good start. How are you feeling?”

“When can I get the epidural?” El gasped.

“We could get that started now if you’d like.”

“*Please*,” she begged, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. “Please, I can’t do this.”

“You’re doing fine, Mrs. Wheeler. Everything is happening exactly like it should be, just rest for now.” The doctor looked at Mike. “Has she eaten anything?”

“Not since last night.”

“Perfect. I’ll get the anesthesiologist over here as soon as possible and we’ll get that epidural going.”

With that the doctor was gone and suddenly El was crying, shivering,

and Mike just sat there for a moment, stunned. She'd been so calm all morning, where was this coming from?

"El, hey," he got up and sat next to her on the edge of her bed. "What's wrong? I thought you were excited to get him out?"

"M-Mike," she was sobbing, her voice stuttering. "It h-hurts and I-I'm s-s-scared."

"Scared of what?" He grabbed her hand, squeezing it.

"Everything."

He reached for her and she went to him, pressing her face against his chest and crying against his shirt, holding onto him tightly. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, letting her be afraid, knowing he was scared too. They'd been planning and preparing and talking about it and now it was actually happening. He was excited, definitely, but there was something in the pit of his stomach, gnawing slowly and making him feel... anxious.

She had always been the anxious one and suddenly he felt clueless, not having the slightest idea how to make himself *and* her feel better. This was happening, what they had been preparing for, what he had been so excited for, but suddenly he was just... terrified.

It *was* everything, and he pulled her closer, trying to rub her back and smother her fear, trying to put on a front despite the worry that was churning his stomach.

"We're okay, El, you're doing great. The doctors have said so and—"

"What happens after? When he's real?" Her voice was muffled against his shirt, the words vibrating against his skin. "When he's not just an idea?"

"Then we take him home, to that cool nursery with the Hadrosaurs that Will painted for us," he spoke quietly, trying to calm himself as well as her. "And you'll rock him in that chair and neither of us will get sleep for the next few... years," he sighed heavily. "I'm sure Dustin and Max and everyone will come over. They're going to be so excited. My mom will lose her shit and she and Holly will come and

visit, maybe even my dad...”

He wasn't as optimistic as usual. Her habit of asking him to spin a tale of the future, of something better than what her anxiety was picturing, had never failed them. He always found a way to make her feel better, to help her see past the fear. But suddenly... he was struggling.

“Maybe... I could call Max,” he offered, feeling desperate for someone to help him. “Maybe she'd want to come and—”

“No,” it was a sob. “No, Mike, I don't want Max right now. I just want *you*.”

“I'm right here, El. I'm not going anywhere.”

“D-Don't leave me alone, *please*,” she looked up at him, her chin resting against his chest, eyes huge and wet and desperate. “I c-can't do this by myself. Don't ever leave me, Mike.”

“I won't. I promise.”

She cried out as another contraction rippled through her and he held her tight, wishing he could take the pain from her, could ease her suffering somehow and do it for her. He felt a wave of guilt, knowing it was his fault. He was the one who had convinced her to keep it, convinced her to reach this point and now it was too much for her to handle. Why had he let her do this?

“I'm sorry, El, I'm so sorry,” he voice was thick with guilt. “This is all my fault.”

She gasped as it finally ended, and then reached up, her hand resting against his cheekbone, making him look down at her. Her face was strained but she shook her head, her other hand fisting into the front of his shirt.

“No. We did this together.” Her voice shook but was firm. “I decided, you didn't make me.”

“But I—”

“No, Mike.” Her hand pulled him down, their foreheads touching. “Together. You and me, always. Remember?”

It was part of his vows, the ones he’d said to her during a warm day in April underneath blooming snow apple trees, sprays of white blossoms crowning her head. He had said those words to her, feeling like he could never happier, holding her hands and promising her the rest of his life.

“You and me, always. Together until the end,” he repeated.

Despite the pain and the fear, she knew he needed the comfort just as much as she did, needed to be reminded that they were in it together, just like he’d promised. Even if she was in some of the most intense pain of her life and he was helpless to do anything but watch as she suffered.

They sat there, holding each other, sharing their breath, feeling the light in the air that surrounded them. Even though the child they were about to bring into the world had almost split them apart, had caused a break between them, they were closer now than ever before, their love intensifying as they realized just how much they needed each *other*.

“Someone ordered an epidural?” The anesthesiologist popped his head in grinning and then ducked down, realizing he was ruining a moment. “Uh, sorry.”

“No, please, help me,” El begged, dropping back against the bed. “I can’t deal with this.”

Mike eased back as the man came in, a nurse following him. He stayed next to El, holding her hand as they inserted the needle and catheter into her spine, her breath hissing out of her. Then the numbness hit and it was like watching her sink into a warm bath, her face relaxing.

Dr. Snow appeared soon afterwards, her usual kind smile on her face. Another check and then more waiting. That’s what it was, lots of waiting, for things to get ready and her body to do what it needed to do.

The epidural helped a lot, El relaxing to the point of seeming bored, and after a while she fell asleep again, the pain having worn her out. Mike held her hand as she slept, feeling immensely grateful for his beautiful wife who was choosing to do one of the hardest, scariest things in the world, kissing her knuckles over and over.

Dr. Snow appeared and woke her up for another exam after another few hours, frowning a bit as she pulled her hand back. Mike noticed but said nothing, not wanting to freak out El. He followed the older woman to the door.

“Is everything okay?” He kept his voice low.

“It’s fine,” she smiled soothingly. “She’s just not progressing as much as we hoped. If she doesn’t dilate more before we hit full labor, that baby won’t be coming out. *But*,” she patted his arm. “I’m going to get some medication that can help with that and we’ll give it a go. Babies take a while sometimes, Michael. No need to worry now.”

He exhaled as she left, trying to relax. If he freaked out, El would lose her shit and he knew right now she needed him to just be calm. Reaching for the remote, he flicked on the TV, flipping through the channels, wanting a distraction.

“What are you doing?” El asked, shifting a bit.

“Just seeing what’s on. Dr. Snow says babies take a while so...” His stomach rumbled loudly. “I figure we could see what’s happening in the outside world since the morning news is on.”

“Are you hungry? You could go—” she started to say.

“Nah, I’m fine. Don’t we have trail mix in the bag? I can munch on that.”

They watched Good Morning America as he proceeded to devour the entire baggie of trail mix and the banana chips that he had put in the bag. He was dying for some coffee, some caffeine to boost him back up, but he wouldn’t leave the room and she knew it, suddenly feeling bad for being so needy earlier.

“Mike, you can go and get a cup of coffee. They have a Starbucks

here, you could get one of those cinnamon latte things you like,” she knew it was his favorite. She only drank her coffee black, but he liked the sweet stuff. “God knows I’d kill for one. I’ve missed coffee.”

“I’m fine, I’m sure we’ll be home soon and I can take a nap or something,” he changed the channel, looking for cartoons. “Don’t worry about me, worry about that kid you’re about to push out.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.”

His eyelids were drooping, his stomach rumbling as he stubbornly adjusted the chair, trying to pretend like he wasn’t uncomfortable. But he totally was, tired and hungry and uncomfortable but excited and nervous and...

I didn’t know it was possible to feel this many conflicting emotions all at once, he marveled, glancing at his wife. Is this what it’s like? Is this how somewhat how she feels when she’s anxious and panicking?

He blinked at her with a newfound appreciation and after a minute she realized he was staring at her, looking over with tired eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m just amazed at how incredible and strong you are and also, I totally love you. Like completely one hundred percent love you,” he smiled but it was muted by the exhaustion he couldn’t hide. “Just thought you should know that.”

She stared at him, an eyebrow raised, like she was evaluating him and he couldn’t help but squirm a bit under her stare. Clearly the lack of sleep was taking a toll on him.

“You need coffee. Please, go,” she smirked at him. “I’ll be okay for five minutes. I have—” she glanced up at the TV. “I have SpongeBob to keep me company.”

“El—”

Dr. Snow appeared again with a nurse, cutting off the argument and Mike sat up straighter, remembering their earlier conversation. There was another examination and she sighed, the same expression of mild

concern on her face.

“Alright, Eleven, it seems like your contractions are happening more quickly even though you aren’t dilating quite like we hoped. I have some Pitocin which can help with that and we’re going to go ahead and break your water. You’re already nice and numb right?”

“Yes,” El nodded, looking mildly worried. “Is he going to be okay?”

“Baby’s fine, he’s just ready to come out and it seems like the rest of you is trying, but we’re just not quite there yet... this will help with that.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Mike piped in. “To help her, um, dilate without the medication?”

Dr. Snow looked amused.

“There are several ways that are said to help, like walking or doing exercises, but that epidural will keep you in bed now. The other option is probably something you wouldn’t be comfortable with, though I’ve been told it helps. Most couples opt for the Pitocin.”

“What is it? We could try it.” He was desperate to help. “Right, El?”

“Um—” she furrowed her brow.

“It’s having sex, Mr. Wheeler.” The doctor’s eyes shone in amusement. “Like I said, few couples I’ve informed have chosen that method.”

For a split second Mike considered it, not really thinking through what she had said, but he glanced at El, who looked decidedly embarrassed, and immediately realized how that was a terrible idea. Of course not. Fuck no.

“Um,” his face burned. “We’ll try the meds.”

They set El up, who looked less than amused by the whole process, particularly the breaking her water thing. She was starting to get tired and just... annoyed. The anxiety had faded to irritation and she just wanted it out so she could go home, the beeping of the fetal monitor and constant bustle of nurses and people becoming annoying

as they poked and prodded her. How hard was it to get some goddamn peace and quiet?

After it was done she let out a heavy sigh and looked over, noticing that Mike had passed out in the chair. His polo shirt still had her snot stains on the front and the collar had flipped up. He definitely had bedhead, his shaggy hair flat on one side and poofy on the other, and he was drooling a bit from the side of his mouth, snoring lightly through his nose. She didn't understand why he wouldn't go and get some coffee, but she knew he could use the nap and gently took the remote, switching to the one of the local channels, hoping that cheesy soap opera she liked was playing.

It was one of her guilty pleasures, and she smiled happily at the screen as the words "General Hospital" appeared on screen. By the time it ended Mike was snoring loudly and she found it was the only noise in the entire building that didn't completely irritate her.

Her eyes rested on him again and she felt a warmth fondness warm her chest. He really had been wonderful and supportive, helping her find the right path despite her fears. They hadn't needed to take the harder path, but some part of her knew that if she hadn't made this choice, he would still be there.

Her hand reached over and gently touched his, tracing the veins on the back his hands. They were so big compared to hers, but always warm and gentle, tracing her lips or tucking her hair behind her ear. And here he was, next to her as always. Her words earlier, reminding him of their vows, had reminded her just how much she needed him, not just to help her have this baby, but to just be in her life.

He stirred at her touch, blinking open his eyes and then snorting awake as he remembered where he was and what was going on.

"Did I miss anything?" His eyes were wide. "What's happening?"

"You were only out for an hour. Still waiting," she sighed unhappily. "It always seems faster in movies and stuff."

"Well, I don't think ten hours of waiting during labor would really do that well in theaters but..." he yawned, rubbing his eyes. "I should

have slept more at home.”

“Mike, if you don’t go and get a coffee I will get out of this bed and drag you down there myself,” she was half irritated and half amused. “It’s going to take you ten minutes tops. Maybe you could buy me a scone for later when we go home?”

He still looked hesitant, but she was wearing him down and he yawned so widely his eyes watered. Wiping them, he glanced towards the door, then back at her.

“El... are you sure?”

“God, yes. Get out of here. We’ll be here when you get back,” she rested her hand on her stomach pointedly.

Standing slowly, he dragged himself to the door, looking at her but definitely tempted by the thought of coffee and maybe a muffin. Or a sandwich. Real food. He paused in the doorway, biting his lip, not wanting to leave her for even a second and she rolled her eyes.

“Go!”

“Okay, fine, I’ll be right back,” he grinned and she huffed but smiled back.

He could smell the coffee when the elevator door opened to the first floor, eagerly following the scent to the Starbucks that was tucked next to the cafeteria area and gift shop. There was a small line but it went quickly and when he reached the register he ordered his usual flavored syrup-filled latte.

“Professor Wheeler?”

He blinked his bleary eyes, realizing that the girl in front of him was one of his Physics students from last semester. Rachel? Regina? Most of them kind of blurred together but he was pretty sure she had sat in the front row. That always helped.

“Yeah, uh...” He realized she was wearing a nametag and glanced at it. “Rebecca, right? How are you doing?”

“Good, I mean, other than working this early shift,” she smiled happily. “Can I ask why you’re here?”

“My, uh, wife is upstairs having a baby.” He felt a thrill of excitement at those words and grinned happily. “I needed a coffee break. It’s been a long night.”

“Oh, wow! Congratulations. You know what? Your coffee is on me,” she told him as she rang him up.

“What?” He already his card out. “No, it’s fine, I can—”

“I would have failed Physics if you hadn’t given me that extra credit assignment last minute,” she insisted. “Please, let me get this for you.”

He tentatively put his wallet back in his pocket, nodding slowly but feeling oddly abashed at the sudden generosity. Sure, he helped students here and there get that passing grade, but he didn’t really expect anything for it. Sometimes they just needed a little help and understanding. It was what any good teacher would do.

“Wow, um, thanks Rebecca. I appreciate that.”

“No problem,” she smiled brightly, handing him his drink. “Congrats again! I hope everything goes well, I bet you’re going to be an awesome dad.”

“Thanks... I hope so.”

He walked away with a smile, feeling a glow of optimism and happiness. Knowing he’d made a positive impact on a student was its own reward. The coffee was just a bonus. Sipping it, he made his way back to the elevator, hitting the fourth floor button and listening to the machinery hum as it made its way up.

The door opened and he heard distant beeping, barely dodging a nurse who jogged past him, down the hall. He frowned, watching as she disappeared into the room where the beeping was coming from, and then counted the doors. El was in the fourteenth room, he’d counted to make sure he wouldn’t walk into the wrong one.

One, two, three, four...

Another nurse ran down the hall.

Five, six, seven, eight...

He saw Dr. Snow appear at the end of the hall and vanish into the room as the beeping intensified.

Nine, ten, eleven, twelve...

His heart was suddenly racing and he sped up.

Thirteen, fourteen.

It was her room, the room with noises and people and panic. A gurney was pushed out of it, surrounded by nurses and the doctor and he caught a glimpse of El's face. She was terrified.

"El?"

He was jogging, then running, but they were rolling her down the hallway just as fast, towards the automatic doors at the very far end marked "OPERATING ROOM" and "NO VISITORS BEYOND THIS POINT" in big red letters, watching as the nearest nurse swiped their ID and opened the doors.

He was still too far away, but he could hear her voice, saying his name. Calling for him. His vision tunneled, his knees wobbling, and he almost buckled and hit the floor. All of the air left his lungs.

"No, please, just wait! He'll be back! Mike!" she begged. "I need him, please! Mike!"

Everything went into slow motion.

The doors were open, and the cluster of people moved through, everyone on the other side dodging out of the way as they rolled her, frantically fast. He finally found his breath, oxygen filling his lungs, the sound of her voice in his ears as he broke into a sprint, chest heaving.

His coffee cup hit the floor, splattering everywhere, his feet slipping, and he crashed to his knees, scrabbling upright again, ignoring the stains on his knees and shirt. He had to keep going, he had to get to her.

She needed him.

He'd never run so fast in his life, but the doors were closing, too quickly, the only thing in the entire world that didn't feel like it was running ten seconds behind. There was a shout from the hallway behind him but he ignored it, eyes straining to see her, focused on only one thing. The only thing in his world.

“El!”

His fists hit the cold metal, the closed doors not budging an inch, his feet not fast enough to get him there in time. Too late. Too slow. Suddenly he collapsed, tears pouring out of his eyes, feeling like everything was falling apart. She was gone, and he hadn't been there.

He hadn't been there.

His voice was hoarse as he pounded against the doors, needing to get in, needing to know that he wasn't about to lose her. Everything else faded away and he sobbed, feeling broken and more scared than he'd ever felt in his entire life, one word on his lips, one name.

“El!”

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm sorry. i'll try and update tomorrow... but i need to edit the next chapter.

don't panic! that's the only advice i can offer lol, which is cruel. i'm sorry i hate cliffhangers but this one felt necessary?? there's been so much happy. IT FEELS WRONG. but like i said... don't panic.

um, yeah... that's... that's all i can say.

sorry

10. I will not let anything take away what's standing in front of me

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry to disappear all of the sudden. i got busy unexpectedly but the good news is i got a job so i'm no longer an unemployed college graduate lol.

i picked the worst chapter to end on though and i'm soRRY. go on, get reading!

“Mr. Wheeler!”

There were hands on his shoulders, trying to pull him up, but he was blinding by tears and panic, his whole body trembling with fear.

Something had gone wrong. They had taken El to the operating room and he didn't know why and she had been calling his name, had needed him. And he'd been getting fucking coffee. He had left her alone.

She was *gone*.

The past six years, she'd always told him how much she needed him. How much he helped her, how he made her better. How even though she knew she was capable of living without him, that she didn't *want* to. And he had promised to always love her and be there. It had been one of his first promises, to always be there when she needed him, and he had broken it.

But he was realizing that in all those years, he had never told her just how much *he* needed *her*.

Sure, he wasn't burdened by darkness and pain, by blind fear and past shadows. He had his own demons but he'd always tried to overcome them and not let them bring him down or change who he wanted to be. They had been obstacles but less impossible or daunting than what she'd had to face, and that was part of it. A big part of him had been motivated to be better *for* her, to be what she

needed.

He needed her to need him.

Maybe that was unhealthy in some way, but he'd always been a giver, taking care of his friends and family, trying to help those who needed it. That's just how he was, he cared too much, sometimes to the point of not taking care of himself to try and meet the needs of others, taking stupid risks or promising impossible things. It was who he was.

And then he'd met the most beautiful and brave girl in the world, who somehow thought his honking snort-laugh was cute and didn't mind that he towered over her and knew more about Lord of the Rings than doing taxes or throwing footballs. She had learned from him and appreciated him and then had chosen him over everything, had let him in further than anyone else and overcame her biggest fear. Her fear of being loved.

He needed her, to calm his fears like he calmed hers, to smile at him and laugh at him and tell him he was stupid. There had never been anyone or anything he'd loved as much as her, and if he lost her... well, he had once. He had seen her push him away, let anger and guilt block out the happiness, how she had let fear and loneliness push her to the edge.

It had ripped him apart.

Most of the time he didn't think about it. Why bring up the past? She had told him kissing Lucas had been a mistake and he never doubted her. It had been nothing, he knew that now, but he remembered feeling like he couldn't breathe, like his heart was ripped out of his chest, the ache that had throbbed there for weeks.

He knew what it was like to lose her and he couldn't do it again. Not after all they had been through since then, the near-misses and the passion and the love. He wouldn't survive losing her. There would be nothing of him left. He had promised all of himself to her, four years ago, in a park in his hometown.

The memory flooded in, still fresh despite the time that had passed.

The sun was shining, warm and bright, through the blossoming snow apple trees, their perfume sweet and heady as the breeze sent showers of white blooms down. There was a trellis with purple wisterias arching over them, the pastor standing beneath it, just behind the happy couple, who were dressed in white and blue.

It was small and intimate, his family and his three best mens' families who had all helped raise him. Her adopted sister sat amongst them on one of the white chairs while her sister-friend stood next to her, the perfect maid of honor, her small family present.

"I believe the two of you prepared vows," Pastor Harold—an old family friend—smiled at the young couple. "Eleven, would you care to go first?"

Mike's bride stood before him, her long white dress matching the blossoms that fell from the trees and scattered around them, getting caught in her hair. Her hazel-browns were shining with adoration and love, no trace of fear as she smiled at him and reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, taking the piece of paper from the pastor.

Her hands shook, but from excitement instead of terror, and she looked down.

"Michael E. Wheeler," she started. "I've never been as good with words as you, which is why I wanted to go first, so my vows don't totally suck compared to yours."

A few chuckles.

"But today, I'm going to try to tell you what you mean to me. Today, I choose again to be yours, to give you every piece of me, no matter how broken. Today, I trust you with my heart, like you've trusted me with yours. Today, I'm not afraid to say I love you and to promise to love you every day after."

He was crying, not realizing it until she looked up and blinked. They were silent tears, full of love and joy, and she gaped at how he was looking at her, like he was seeing her for the first time. It took her a moment but she continued.

"Mike, you make me better, in every single way. You are a good , kind

and honest and willing, things I didn't think could all exist in a person at once. You're the sunshine I never knew I wanted and I promise to always reflect back the light you make. I promise to always try my hardest to be the best for you, to take care of you when you catch a cold and whine—" A pointed snort of laughter from his family. *"—to cheer you up when you're upset over me never having seen Ghostbusters—" More laughter, mostly from the guys. "—and to always be there when you need to complain about Lucas cheating during game night."*

There was soft "hey!" from behind Mike, but everyone ignored it, fixated on the two lovers.

"I promise to never leave you, to always stay in your arms where I belong. I promise to take care of you like you take care of me. When you're near me, I'm not—" her voice broke and she felt tears filling her eyes. "I'm not afraid when I'm with you. I love you, Mike. And I promise I always will."

He barely resisted reaching for her and kissing her right then, but Pastor Harold cleared his throat and handed him the piece of paper he'd written his vows on earlier.

"Michael, would you like to read yours now?" he prompted.

Mike reached for her hand, wanting to hold her to close but settling for at least making contact. He barely looked at the paper, having memorized every word.

"Eleven. El. My El." He wiped at his tears. "I never expected what would happen that day I felt you bump into me at the bookstore, never expected it to lead this. You were a strange girl, clever and funny and sarcastic, and so beautiful it took my breath away. And then I got to know you." He cleared his throat, shifting a bit. "You were even more than that, a breathtaking mix of beauty and grace with sharp edges and biting wit that intrigued me like no one had before. But you didn't even know it. Somehow, by some miracle, you picked me to be the one to show you, to tell you how your eyes glowed with stars you love and how your smile unlocked every part of my heart. You let me see your fears and helped me conquer mine, one rooftop at a time."

She was smiling, that wide one that made her dimples show, eyes bright and shining, sparkling with tears and love. He paused and resisted the

urge to kiss her again, trying to finish his vows first.

"From now until forever, I promise to stay by your side, to always want you. To be your comfort when you feel afraid, to be your light when you're lost in darkness, to guide you when you don't know the way. I promised before to always be there when you need me, to love you even when you don't deserve it, and I promise all of that again today."

They were both crying, the silent kind that only made her more beautiful, dripping onto their fancy wedding clothes. He took a deep breath.

"I promise that we'll always be together. You and me, always. Together until the end."

He couldn't hold back any longer, his arms reaching and pulling her to his chest, needing to feel her in his arms. His lips met her forehead, smelled the sweet flowers that crowned her head and the slight perfume of the peach shampoo she still used. She was intoxicating and she was holding him too, everything soft and warm and perfect.

He'd promised her so many things in those vows, but as he held her in his arms, he'd promised silently to himself to never let her feel anything but love from him. To always hold her close.

To always keep her safe.

"Mr. Wheeler! Michael, can you hear me?"

He realized he was on the floor and looked up at the voice saying his name. It was Flo, the nurse who had admitted them, and she looked equal parts concerned and irritated, holding out a hand to him.

"I'm going to have to ask you to move, you're blocking the door to the OR," she tugged his shoulder gently, her touch oddly comforting. "And I need you to stop yelling, you're making the other families on the floor nervous."

"El," he gasped. "What happened? Why did they take her?" His eyes filled with tears. "Is she going to die?"

"No, good heavens, did they not tell you anything?" Flo looked suddenly alarmed.

“No,” he croaked. “They just took her.”

Flo got him to a chair, shaking her head in annoyance.

“I’m sorry, they had to rush her to have an emergency c-section. The baby’s heartrate was dropping and she wasn’t dilated enough so it was necessary to get him out, though I know it wasn’t what you two were planning,” she rubbed his shoulder gently. “I noticed you weren’t in the room.”

“She made me go and get coffee... I left her *alone*,” he wiped at his eyes, the panic fading a bit as he noticed Flo didn’t seem too concerned. “An emergency c-section?”

“It’s not uncommon, it’s less of an emergency and more of just a necessity but that word doesn’t always get people moving as quickly. Sometimes things don’t happen that we need to happen for a smooth delivery and we have to take baby out to keep anything from going wrong. They’re prepping her now, would you like to head in?”

“I can go in?!” he gasped.

At that Flo chuckled, and her laugh was warm and easy, the tension draining out of his body. He had totally overreacted, but how was he not supposed to? Seeing his wife rolled down the hallway with monitors beeping and people rushing like it was some episode of Grey’s Anatomy, he had just assumed the worst. Apparently it wasn’t even close to the worst.

“Of course you can, we encourage the father to go in. I’ll get you some shoe covers and scrubs and take you right in. It sounded like she wanted you with her anyways.”

“I promised to never leave her but I—” His voice broke.

“None of that self pity, young man, come with me, I’ll get you to your wife,” Flo rested a hand on his shoulder and swiped her card, the cold metal doors opening again. “Everything’s going to be fine, just breathe and you’ll be with her soon.”

He let himself be lead, trying not to pass out from the sheer relief that was coursing through him, sliding on the blue scrubs and shoe

covers, one of those hairnet things on his head. Flo told him different stories of other c-sections that had been rather unexpected, one mother who had thrown a tantrum and tried to refuse, a myriad of fathers that had passed out right on the OR floor.

“I would recommend not looking at the surgical site,” she patted his scrubs. “It’s not very pretty to see and might make you feel a little... woozy.”

And then she lead him into the room, past where the doctors and nurses were gathered around El’s stomach, past a partition that blocked her head from the rest of her body. When she saw him she let out a sob and her hand reached for him.

“El, oh my god, El, I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have left—” He pressed her hand to his lips, feeling so relieved he could have thrown up. “I promised not to leave and I *did* and look what happened.”

“I-It’s not your fault, Mike, I told you to go.” She shook her head at him for trying to blame himself. “And it was fine, I didn’t feel anything different but his heart monitor started going crazy and they said he was in distress so we needed to get him out and I...” She was gripping his hand so hard her knuckles were white. “I wanted to wait for you, I told them to wait but they said they couldn’t. That he could get hurt if we waited.”

“I’m here now, El, I’m not going anywhere, okay? I’m not leaving again.”

He bent down and pressed a kiss to her forehead and then rested there, breathing in her powdery, sweaty smell, feeling her breath on his face and then letting out his own choked sob of relief. She was safe and he was there with her and he almost crumpled to his knees.

“I thought I lost you, El,” his tears dripped onto her forehead. “I saw them rolling you and heard you saying my name and then you were gone... I’ve never been so scared in my entire life, not even when I saw you sitting on that ledge back in college.” That had been scary, but this one would have been a double hit. “I thought lost *both* of you and I couldn’t—” his voice broke and then her hands were on his cheeks, pushing him back so she could look at him.

Her eyes burned into his, matching tears filling them and then she pulled him down again, holding him against her face, pressing his nose against her forehead and shuddering, needing to just feel him close.

It had been both of their worst nightmares but now they were together again and despite the surgery going on right there in that very room on her body, everything felt right. Sort of. She grimaced a bit and looked down at the surgical sheet that separated them from what was going on.

“Everything’s going great, Eleven,” Dr. Snow’s voice was muffled by her surgical mask. “We’re just getting to the uterus, your baby will be here soon. Dad, did you want to cut the cord when he’s out?”

“Oh, um, yeah,” Mike felt his heart speed up. “That would be great.”

“I’ll let you know when we need you.”

Now that the immense fear was gone, Mike felt a surge of excitement. The thing they had been preparing for, the thing he’d never expected to happen, was about to happen. He was going to hold his son soon, seen the tiny life they had created together. All his fears and doubts faded and he felt himself grinning.

“El, El it’s happening,” he squeezed her hand again. “We get to meet him soon.”

“I hope he’s like you,” she breathed, wincing a bit and glancing down again at where they were operating on her. “This is the weirdest thing. It’s like when you get a cavity filled. And they numb you so don’t feel it but you can still *feel* it, you know?”

“Does it hurt?”

“No. I just wish they didn’t have to cut me open,” she was frowning. “I thought I was done with that.”

“They’re saving our baby’s life, El,” he kissed her forehead again. “It’ll just be another scar for me to love. You know I never minded the old ones.”

“I—”

They were interrupted by Dr. Snow again.

“Alright, here he comes!”

Thinking back to it later, Mike couldn’t remember most of what happened next, a lot of blurry tears and excitement. He remembered the doctor talking and then the sound of a baby crying, so loud it shook the whole world. A nurse led him past the partition and then he was looking down at his son, red and purple and covered in goo, screaming loudly. There was a pair of surgical scissors put into his hands and he’d stared numbly. He had been trembling as he cut the cord and then the nurses wrapped his son up, the tiny, angry bundle trembling at the audacity of being brought into the world, and handed him over to his father.

“Wow,” he breathed, staring down at the tiny face that was his future. “You really are incredible, huh?”

The baby screamed louder, his eyes squeezed shut, upset at his sudden arrival and wanting to go back to the dark, cozy space where he had been warm and safe. His head was covered in thick, dark hair, and as Mike stared down at his son, he felt tears coming again.

“Mike?” El’s voice was tired. “Can I... can I see him?”

His feet moved on their own, taking him over to where his wife lay as they closed her up on the operating table, looking... nervous, but definitely relieved. She tried to lift her head up, and Mike sat down on a stool, gently setting the baby on her chest, so she could look down and see him more easily.

“He’s here, El, you did it. You did so well,” Mike told her, keeping one hand on their son as she carefully wrapped her arms around him, his other hand stroking her forehead. “I’m so proud of you.”

The angry crying quieted, like the tiny, blind, squirming thing could tell he was in the safest place, with the two people who had created him. The two people who had made the decision to keep him and let him arrive, already loving them without understanding why.

Understanding that there would never be a safer place in the world.

El gaped, staring down at him, then looked up at Mike, face etched in disbelief.

“He’s...”

“Perfect?” Mike supplied. “Beautiful? Amazing? Ethereal?”

“Kind of gross looking,” she admitted, smiling down at their son, her finger stroking the red cheek.

“He’s fresh out of the oven, babe, you have to give him some time to get cute,” he was barely holding back a laugh. “Do you like him?”

“He has your hair. And your nose, I think. Definitely your legs, I knew that months ago.”

Her eyes didn’t leave the bundle in her arms, fixated on the miniature human being she had spent so many months growing and taking care of and worrying about. All of that anxiety and fear... for this moment? She felt more at peace than ever before, like everything was right and no longer a question she’d been too scared to guess. Like somehow now she knew the answer.

“Hello, Sam,” she murmured. “Welcome to the world, little one. That’s your daddy,” she pointed at Mike, as if the squinted eyes could see his father. “And he already loves you more than anything in the entire world. Which is a whole lot.”

Her voice got even softer, her finger stroking the silky cheek, watching as her son opened his tiny, pink mouth in a yawn, her voice thick with an emotion she didn’t fully understand yet.

“And I’m your mommy, little one, and I love you too.”

Notes for the Chapter:

you didn't think i'd actually let anything bad happen, did you? they've definitely suffered enough haha.

idk i just felt like mike would overreact, y'know? like

he's been kind of nervous and all of the sudden his worst fears are playing out but in reality he just needs to talk to a nurse. there's a lot of things that can "go wrong" that aren't as big of a deal as they seem. but i wanted mike to reach that point of despair and kind of realize what he put he and el into when he decided he wanted to keep their kid. also, a chance to write mileven wedding vows? sign me the fuck up.

hope that lived up to your expectations. i thought about having el cry, but honestly, i think she'd mostly just be relieved. kind of a moment-of-truth thing. you wait and wait and expect and hope but until it happens you can't know for sure. and now el is sure.

anywhoo, i have things to do and stories to write but i missed you all and i'll try and post again soon.

-g

11. Welcome to our world

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry. i've been stupidly busy and working on other things, but i haven't forgotten about this fic and i intend to finish it like i planned.

i originally planned for there to be two more chapters after this one but after some heavy pondering, i honestly don't think i need them. there's going to be epilogue set five years later, however, that i'm working on right now. you'll want to read that. ;)

Mike jerked awake at the sound of a baby's cry, looking around the dark room with bleary eyes, trying to figure out where he was. The baby squawked again, nearby and he remembered everything in a flash, the hospital, the surgery, El and their son. Their *son*.

The doctor had wanted them to stay the night just to make sure everything was okay with mom and baby and they had brought a bed for Mike to sleep on. He didn't want to go home without them. Luckily—thanks to his mother's insistence—the go-bag had included spare pajamas and clothes for *both* of them, and they'd been moved to one of the other rooms in the ward that had a full bathroom and felt a bit more homey.

So far everything had been fine. Perfect, even.

"Mike?" El's voice sounded as sleepy as he felt. "Can you bring him here? I think he's hungry."

"Yeah, of course."

There was a lamp in the room that he turned on instead of the overheads, the light less harsh, and then he shuffled over to the bassinet where Sam was crying. It was next to El's bed, which was propped slightly upright, but she was in no hurry to get out of it after her epidural and surgery and Mike was more than happy to help. Any

excuse to hold to Sam was a good one.

He felt the thrill in his chest as he looked down at his son again, picking up the squirming baby and holding him closely, smiling down at him. Sam was wearing one of the onesies they'd been given at the Lord of the Rings themed baby shower Max had thrown. It had been fun, with Lembas bread sandwiches and root beer in pint glasses marked "The Green Dragon". Lucas had been the one who'd given them an entire box full of onesies with different sayings, and Mike had grabbed one to bring Sam home in. The one he'd picked said "But what about second breakfast?" and Mike thought it oddly appropriate since it was probably six or seven in the morning and they'd only fed him a few hours ago.

"Shhh," he tried to soothe him, swaying back and forth as he walked over to her bed. "You're going to get what you want, little man, don't worry."

"I don't think babies listen to reason, Mike," El said tiredly. "All he knows right is sleeping and eating."

"Is that why he stops crying every time you hold him?"

"He doesn't, you're just imagining things."

Mike knew part of her didn't want to believe it, but it was true. Every time she pulled the little bundle to her chest, whether to feed or comfort, he would stop crying, calming and staring around with wide eyes almost immediately. It was borderline miraculous.

He said nothing as he passed the baby to her, raising an eyebrow pointedly as Sam started to quiet, his tiny mouth gaping open as he stared up at his mother. She pulled her gown off of her shoulder so he could eat, sighing in relief as he easily latched on, getting what he wanted like his father had said. Apparently that was a problem for some people, getting the baby to latch. Karen had told El that both of her girls had been easy, but that Mike had refused for the first few days. He had shrugged, feeling awkward in the conversation, hoping that their kid wasn't as troublesome. And so far he wasn't. Mike had the odd sense that Sam was determined to be the least fussy baby he'd ever encountered... one that seemed to already be a mama's

boy.

“See? He’s quiet now,” he insisted.

“His mouth is full, Mike.”

Instead of crawling back into his own bed, he sat on the edge of hers and she scooted over carefully, more than willing to share. He crawled in, under the covers, and she leaned her shoulder back against him and let out a content sigh, feeling... calm.

“He knows you, El,” he insisted, stroking Sam’s soft skin as his light eyes staring up at his parents. “He knows you’re his mom.”

“Maybe.”

There hadn’t been much time to just talk. After the birth she had spent most of the day napping or feeding and then eating and sleeping. Mike hadn’t left them, too nervous, but he had called his parents and let them know their grandson was here. His mom had screamed and then asked when they could visit. He’d called Nancy and Holly too, letting them know they were aunts. Then it had been his friends, thought he knew Max had already told Dustin and they both planned to stop by soon. Will was back in New York but promised to visit next month, and Lucas was in Florida at NASA, but said he’d been saving up his vacation days.

It had been a lot of love and Mike was sure his heart would burst from the happiness that filled him like a glowing sun. He had his wife and their son and all of their friends and family who loved them. How could he been anything but totally grateful? Especially after facing the possibility of losing everything?

He kissed El’s temple as they gazed down at their child.

“He’s cuter without the goo all over his face,” Mike admitted. “I think he has your nose, actually, it’s more of a button than a... a whatever I have.”

“Mmm,” she hummed, too engrossed to get on her husband for being self-deprecating. “His eyes are blue, but aren’t they supposed to change?”

“That’s what the books said.”

“No freckles,” she almost sounded disappointed.

“Not yet. Those are from the sun. I didn’t get freckles until I was three.”

He reached down, pressing his finger against the tiny fist, smiling as Sam grabbed his father’s finger, holding it tightly as he nursed. It was a firm grip that made Mike smile, and El stroked his hair, soft and silky and dark, her fingers gentle.

“How are you doing?” he asked, realizing he hadn’t inquired in a while, glancing up from the baby to meet his wife’s eyes. “You still okay with all of this?”

“Yes? It’s like... hard to explain. I mean, I never *wanted* this. I wouldn’t have chosen this if I’d been offered all the money in the world... but...” Her eyes softened as she looked down at the baby in her arms. “I’m glad he’s here. I’m glad he’s ours. I’m okay with this right now.”

“Me too.”

“I’m still scared. Of whatever is going to happen because now I—” She was still stroking his hair, eyes gazing distantly, as if she was imagining the future. “Now I would do anything to keep him safe. To keep him from hurting or feeling scared. I want to protect him and love him... I didn’t think I could love him so much. I didn’t know it would feel like this.”

“You always underestimate yourself, El,” he sighed against her temple. “After you told me that you... I mean, I remember the way you looked at me when you said, ‘I don’t want to kill it’, and that’s when I knew you could do it. I knew you could love whoever we had made. I knew you had it in you.”

“I love him almost as much as I love you,” she whispered.

Mike looked at her, watched as she stared down at their son, stroking his cheeks and hands and head, like she was still amazed at his existence. His heart swelled and he understood what she meant. All

of him was hers, she was his first love and would always be, this child didn't take away from that. But there was some new part of him, a part he'd never really had the chance to discover, that entirely belonged their child, a part of him that would risk his life and sacrifice everything... just like he would for her.

"I'm proud of you, El. For not letting yourself be afraid."

"*I am* afraid," she whispered. "Afraid for him."

"But you're not afraid of yourself anymore. You're not afraid of loving him," he reasoned. "I knew you didn't think you could."

"He's part of you. And I love you. And he's part of me... and I love myself now too," she was murmuring, like it was something she'd never said out loud. "I know he's not always going to be perfect or amazing but I just... *I love* him, Mike. I don't even know how."

They quieted and just watched him as he ate, his tiny mouth greedy, and when he was done he fell back asleep, the dark room warm and comfortable, feeling safe in his mother's arms. El pulled the hospital gown back up over her shoulder but when Mike moved to take him and head back to bed, she shook her head.

"Stay here with us." She turned to look at him, over her shoulder, eyes soft. "Please?"

"Of course, El."

He kissed her, on the lips, for the first time since all of it had started, gentle and warm, feeling more love for her than ever before. Passion for sure, but a softer kind, grateful and happy. She was tired and unsure of the future, but she loved their son despite all the months of anxiety.

The silent fear he'd been ignoring was gone. It was something he'd only admitted once, to Dustin, while stupidly drunk, a fear he'd squashed and ignored, one he couldn't believe would ever become a reality.

That she wouldn't love their son. That she would take one look at him after all of it and still not want him, her fear overriding the love

he knew she had inside of her. That Mike would watch as they took him away and gave him to someone else, the tiny echo of his soul ripped away from him. It was a fear he had never told her, instead choosing to support her and love her and believe in her, to give her the strength he knew she needed instead of the doubt.

And he had been right. She loved him. She loved *them* .

He loved her.

Notes for the Chapter:

last chapter might not make it out until next weekend, sorry. i was hoping finishing school would give me more for writing but i'm still learning everything at my new job and i get home and i'm so dang tired. i think it will better soon. i hope.

also i know a lot of babies are screamers and stuff, but i've listened to/read so many stories about different babies at this point (i did do my research) that for el's sanity sake, i like to think that sam is quiet one... amazing how different every kid can be.

thank you for all the kind comments on last chapter! i didn't mean to scare you all so bad but i'm glad you liked the wedding flashback. mike and el are gonna kill me i love them so much aaahhh.

thanks for supporting me even when i vanish. <3

-g

12. I love you, always forever

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm sorry.

i've been struggling the past month and halfish to write. i kept pulling up this chapter and hating everything i wrote and it was really making feel shitty and terrible. i knew i was disappointing you guys for vanishing but sometimes i'm not good at admitting i'm struggling. so i vanished without explanation and i apologize for that.

the good news is i got hella drunk and cried and finally wrote something that (upon waking up sober) i really liked. i think i might even love it.

i'm not a parent and i don't really want to be, so if you can remember that while reading this, please have a little wiggle room for my inexperience. i hope you like it.

The high-pitched squeal of childish laughter echoed in from the living room, making El wince as she pulled the ice cream cake from the freezer. Laughter made her smile, but the squeal always made her eardrums hurt, especially when it was from a dozen kids instead of one. There was the thumping of feet and then the entire horde of first graders went running by the kitchen door in a flash of dress-up clothes and capes and more squealing.

“No running until you—” She started to call but they had all made it out the backyard and onto the castle-themed playset before she could finish her reprimand. Oh well.

Mike appeared, much more slowly, panting, like he'd been running around but clearly happy, a huge grin on his face. He had on a child-sized royal blue cape and was holding a plastic sword, ducking into the kitchen and grabbing the perspiring glass of lemonade on the counter he'd left behind earlier. El felt herself smirking at him,

amused, as she set the cake on the counter.

“Finally tired you out, huh?”

“Oh, no way,” he protested. “We just slayed the Demogorgon. Sam struck the final blow and it crumpled to the ground with a dreadful shriek. He’s almost as good of a paladin as me.”

“He’s the birthday boy, he gets to be better than you today,” she snorted.

“Yeah, well...” Mike looked sheepish, his sword drooping. “Old habits die hard.”

“Where are Dustin and Max?”

“Downstairs. Luke needed a nap which I thought was going to be impossible but apparently he’s used to noise so he can sleep through fifty pairs of stomping feet...” He shook his head in amazement. “Dustin just ran down to check on them, that’s why I shooed the hooligans outside. There’s too many when it’s just me.”

He plopped down, looking out the window to the backyard where the mob of children were climbing over the new playset. It had been Sam’s big present and was a huge hit. What kid didn’t want to slide down a castle? Mythical gifts were always the way to go.

“We can do cake soon, then presents and everyone’s parents are picking them up around seven, so I was thinking the house will be quiet by then,” she sighed, walking across the kitchen and leaning next to him. “I don’t know how Max is going to handle *three*. Sam’s enough for me.”

She gazed out the window where he was looking, spotting their son at the very top of the playset, holding his sword above him and making some grand speech that the other kids were listening to with rapt attention. She smiled.

It was his sixth birthday, and he’d been begging to have all of his friends over so they could play “Dragons”, which was what he called the imaginative play that was really just a lot of Mike’s D&D lore mixed with Lord of the Rings and a bit of Narnia too. Sam’s bedtime

stories were always wild—his father was a master at it—and he told them to his classmates at school, inspiring them and leading them on the playground.

Her gaze rested on his small face, the freckles that spattered across his button nose and cheeks, that she loved to kiss. He had Mike's complexion and face shape, but her nose and eye color, soft honeyed moss hazels with a glint of amber around the centers. His hair had been dark but had lightened a bit, looking near black but actually just a dark brown when the sun caught it. A perfect mix of the two of them.

"Max and Dustin always wanted a baseball team. It's a good thing Sammy convinced them not to wait any longer or they'd been having kids until they were forty," Mike snorted good-humoredly. "And I like that he and Jeanie are in the same class."

"It's convenient."

No more than a month after their friends had held Sam the day after his birth, Max had excitedly called her sister-friend to tell her they were expecting. Apparently the baby fever had been too strong. Less than a year later Jean Ellie Henderson was born. Luke followed two years later and Max was currently six months into her third pregnancy. It made El shudder... but she was more than happy for her friend.

One was more than enough, she had decided.

Her pregnancy had been traumatic in more ways than one and while she was grateful that it had given them Sam, she was firm on him being the only one. Admittedly, he was a quiet kid, pretty calm and introspective, but the second one of his friends—or Jeanie—came over he turned into a wild thing. She supposed it was good, he obviously hadn't inherited her social anxiety, but it was tiring nonetheless for *her*. Having more than one? No way.

Mike had seem unbothered by that, completely satisfied with their boy and more than happy to entertain him and any of his friends who came over. Their house had become a popular playdate destination which she didn't mind too much now that they were a little older and

didn't need constant supervision.

Speaking of supervision...

"Why don't you round them up and we can do the cake?" She leaned against her husband and smiled as he wrapped his arm around her waist, a little sweaty but sweet all the same.

"That's probably a good—"

There was a cry from outside and they both whipped around to see a circle of kids surrounding someone on the ground. And the wail of a hurt child.

Mike leapt to attention, quickly scurrying out the door as El watched from the window, wondering whose parent she would have to apologize to. He reached the circle, looking worried, and reached down to pick up the injured child, a familiar dark mop of hair tucking itself into his father's neck.

Sam.

El met them at the door, Mike's eyes gazing down at the knee that was bleeding and caked with dirt, and she relaxed a bit. A scraped knee wasn't so bad. Better than a broken limb or a concussion or—

"Mommy," Sam cried, arms reaching for her, tears streaming down his freckled cheeks.

Her heart broke.

She took him from Mike, feeling the familiar grip of his legs around her waist as he wrapped his arms around her neck and cried pitifully. He was getting heavier every day and her back reminded her that she wasn't twenty anymore but she ignored it and quickly walked towards the bathroom. His crying made her want to cry too and she felt the familiar wish to take the pain from him and protect him and never let him get hurt again.

"Shhh, Sam, it's okay," she soothed, sitting him on the counter. "What happened?"

"I was f-fighting an orc and I f-fell." He sobbed heavily, wiping his face and smearing dirt on his cheeks, whimpering pitifully. "It hurts, Mommy."

"I know, sweetie, I know. I'll make it better," she promised, wiping his sweaty forehead and cheeks with the hand towel, trying to think of a way to distract him from the pain. Usually asking about his adventures did the trick...

"Did you beat the orc?" she asked casually as she pulled some peroxide out from under the sink and taking his shoe and sock off of his injured leg. "Before it tried to get you?"

The question made him pause his crying, and he quieted as she gently washed the wound with water, getting the dirt out, and then drizzled peroxide to disinfect. He was fairly used to it—his rambunctiousness landed him with the occasional bruises and scrapes—and knew his mom wasn't hurting him but helping him. But the more important question was the fate of the orc.

"Yeah!" He puffed his chest out proudly, nodding. "I did. I saved Jeanie and then when I fell she van—" He frowned, trying to sound out the word he'd use his dad use. "Van-squished. She van-squished it!"

"Good job, baby," she kissed his sweaty forehead, pulling out the colorful boxes of bandaids they kept for such a purpose. "Do you want a dinosaur bandaid or Wolverine?"

"Wolverine!"

She put some antibacterial cream on the bandaid and then carefully put it over the scrape, pressing a kiss to it too, and tickling his ribs making Sam giggle. A kiss on his nose and then she wiped his face with a tissue and pulled him off of the counter, giving him a fierce hug and feeling relieved that he'd stopped crying. It always killed her when he cried.

He wrapped his small arms as far around her as he could and snuggled into her chest, taking the comfort she offered happily and pressing into her, unashamed of his mother's love. In some ways he

really was a little Mike, giving her so much more than she'd ever asked for, making it easy to love back just as much. She never wanted to let him go.

He squirmed a bit and with a sigh she loosened her grip.

"All better?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes! I have to go find the orc army and—" He started excitedly as she helped him hop off of the counter.

"How about some cake first? And then I think you have presents," she persuaded. "Uncle Will is going to stop by soon too."

"Really? Is he bringing Lucy?"

"I think so... they had to pick up something so they're a little late."

Lucy was Will's foster daughter. She'd been with him for three years—she'd arrived when she was four—so she was a little older than Sam. Will had ended up moving back to Hawkins and getting a house and teaching art at Hawkins Middle, working on commissions inbetween. He had fostered several kids, but Lucy had stayed over the years and El had a suspicion that an adoption was in the works.

The three older children loved each other like real cousins and in the past year or so had been begging to see each other, prompting Will to drive the hour or so on weekends so Lucy, Jean and Sam could play. Sam ended up in a princess dress drinking tea as much as he lead the charge on another troglodyte army with is his two loyal generals. El was glad that he didn't seem to mind doing "girly" things like other boys his age, since a good majority of his time was spent with the little girls. One less argument to have to mediate.

They let Sam make a lot of his choices about clothes and bandaids and what he wanted to be for Halloween. He loved superheros and knights and her favorite Cinderella movie and putting the Barbie he'd wanted for Christmas when he was four inside of his Tonka truck because "she's a construction lady".

He always made her proud and she loved him so much sometimes she wanted to just cry, unable to understand how all of the pain and hurt

in her life had somehow still allowed her to have this. Such an amazing, all-encompassing joy.

And damn it all if she raised a son who didn't respect girls as equals and was secure enough in his masculinity that he was okay being a princess every now and then. She had a master's in Psychology and Psychotherapy and while she wasn't about to brainwash her kid, she knew there would never be a day when she didn't allow him to cry or buy pink goggles or describe something he liked as "pretty". And if someday he brought home a nice boy to meet his parents, she would sure as hell be happy. Nothing would ever keep her from loving her son, no choice or predisposition or preference he could have or make would change that.

But she worried anyways, of what the world would think if he did those things. Of what people could say, how they could hurt him and make him feel unwanted or broken or worthless. And she wouldn't be able to stop them, her love the only thing she could give to help him know that he was an amazing, flawed, perfectly-unperfect human being. She hoped it would be enough.

For the most part Mike didn't let her worry, talking out her doubts, assuring her that their child felt safe and loved with them, that while the world was terrible, their love and support could help him through any of the terrible things that happened. So instead of letting the anxiety take over—though it did far and far less as the years went by—she took deep breaths and kissed her son's face and fingers and blew raspberries on his stomach to make him laugh. And kept up with her therapist and medication. She didn't let her duties as a mother overtake her duties to herself. Mike helped remind her that it was okay for her to need that.

So the anxiety and depression would appear and she would make it through like she always had, but somehow... more easily. Just like Mike had made it easier, had made her want to be better, Sam had doubled that urge to try and to fight.

So she did.

"You ready now?"

“Yes. Thank you, Mommy,” he said politely, his manners well taught.

“I love you, Sammy,” she rubbed his shoulder and opened the bathroom door. “More than anything.”

“I love you too, Mommy,” he grinned up at her, his smile looking more and more like Mike’s every day.

He immediately bolted in excitement, heading for the backyard again where his peers let out a cheer at his reappearance and all started oohing over his bandaid. Kids bounced back so quickly, sometimes she wondered if they were made of elastic and glue.

“He’s such a mama’s boy,” Mike teased good-naturedly as she made her way back into the kitchen. “I get out there and all he says is, ‘I want Mommy’. Hmph.”

“He never asks me to play with him or tell him stories,” El shot back.

“That’s because you try and get into the psychology of why the mouse wants a cookie instead of just reading the book in a funny voice,” he grinned.

“That mouse is greedy! Not a good example.”

Just then the doorbell rang and El gestured pointedly to the kids before she went for the front door, wanting Mike to keep an eye out. She figured it was Will and she was right, of course, opening the door to the grinning face of—

“Lucas?” she gasped.

He flipped the silver aviator glasses he’d been wearing up onto his head, grinning at her and then she saw Will behind him looking equally gleeful and realized this had been planned.

Lucas was still going. His job at NASA meant he didn’t have as much time to visit and was the furthest away, but he managed to make it into town two or three times a year. He was currently training to actually go into space and work on a space station doing repairs. She hadn’t expected to see him until after all of it.

“Hey, El,” he was way too smug about surprising her. “Good to see you too.”

“Shut up!”

She was hugging him despite her harsh words, happy to see him. Even more excited for Sam to see him. Sam *loved* Lucas, his cool uncle who was going to be an astronaut and always brought cool toys and took him out for ice cream. And Jean and Lucy, of course. He was *the* uncle and he knew it, taking pride in spoiling his nieces and nephews absolutely rotten.

There was a ruffle of fabric as Lucy pushed her way out from behind the adults and took off towards the backyard, clearly wanting to join her friends. She was thin, waifish, with straight silver-blonde hair and green eyes that contrasted to Jeanie’s wild red curls and icy-blues. They loved each other like sisters and El felt a fondness, recognizing that Lucy needed someone as strong as Jean to help balance out her shyness. It was another tiny mirror and El hoped that Lucy would have the support she herself had never had at that age.

“You were planning this, huh?” She glared at Will who had the decency to look sheepish. “I can’t believe you.”

“Will! Lucas!”

Mike came out of the hallway, smiling so widely it looked like his face would break. Just then there were footsteps up from the basement and Dustin appeared, the cycle of surprise starting over again. El stepped back and let the four friends enjoy their reunion, slipping back into the kitchen to grab that cake. She had to get it the kids before it melted.

Mike had managed to get them around the dining table but the room was filled with shrieking and squealing and incessant chatter that made her wince. Before she gave in and asked the boys to help, they filed into the kitchen and took over, Dustin and Mike going into the dining room to quiet the children as Lucas lit the candles. They started singing Happy Birthday as she carried the cake in, Lucas staying hidden in the kitchen until after Sam blew out the candles.

He took one step out and—

“Uncle Lukey!”

It was a scream and then Sam had pushed back from the table and run across the room to the tall man, forgetting his cake, Jean hot on his heels. The two children almost bowled him over, chattering excitedly while the rest of kids seemed a bit confused but excited nonetheless.

“You didn’t think I’d miss your birthday, right?” He teased, ruffling Sam’s hair. “I think there’s a pretty neat present waiting for you too...”

“When do you go to space, Uncle Lukey?” Sam asked with wide eyes.

“Next year, kiddo. I still have to get ready...”

Lucas ended up telling the stories of his training to the entire table of kids as they ate their cake, quiet for once, and then everyone moved to the living room for presents. El tried to mentally keep track of who gave him what so she could try and thank parents but after the fourth box of Legos she decided it was kind of hopeless and just enjoyed the smiles and shrieks of joy that her boy made as he ripped the wrapping paper.

Mike came up next to her again, pulling her against him and pressing an unnoticed kiss to her head.

“And you were so worried about today,” he murmured. “That everything would go wrong.”

“There are currently seventeen children in our house, Mike. How was I not supposed to worry about it?” She sighed, feeling tired. “Next year we’re just taking them Chuck E. Cheese and letting them go nuts. I don’t know if I can do this again.”

“Aw, come on, it’s fun.”

“For *you*,” she snorted. “You finally have a captive audience.”

There was a pause where she expected him to say something sarcastic

or pretend to be hurt but instead he was quiet. She turned to look at him, eyebrow raised, noticing how he licked his lips nervously.

“I found a publisher,” he blurted. “They want to publish my book. For real.”

El couldn’t hide her surprise. “The one you finished six years ago? I thought you had...”

“Given up?” He winced. “I did for a while. But I started to edit it a bit. And I, uh, kind of told the whole thing to Sam at bedtime for a few months. He gave me better ideas about what a kid would want to read and now... they want to publish it, El.” His eyes were shining and she felt his excitement burst into her, the feeling contagious.

She did the only responsible thing to do when in a room of six year-olds, tugging him into the kitchen and then pulling him down to kiss him fiercely. When she let him go he looked a bit dazed and she smiled. Another one of his dreams coming true.

“I’m so proud, Mike. I know it’s something you always wanted to do.”

“Thanks, babe,” he grinned and pulled her closer, trying to kiss her again.

“Mike—” She protested lightly. “The kids are—”

“Busy. Let me kiss you. I just published a book, I want my reward.”

She snorted at his definition of a reward but gave in, kissing him like they were the only two people in the world. Like she was nineteen and falling in love with a boy she’d sworn would mean nothing to her. Like she was fresh out of college with a ring on her finger that promised her future. Like they were standing under flowering trees in spring, eyes full of tears as they said I do.

He finally let her go and she had to wipe her mouth, annoyed at how smug he looked but somehow still totally in love with him all the same.

“Congratulations, you just rubbed off half of my makeup,” she scolded.

“You don’t need it.”

“I’m old and my skin is shit, Mike. Try again.”

“If you’re old, that makes me ancient,” he teased, kissing her cheek.

“Yeah, you’re my oldass man.” It was a snort. “Now come on, celebration’s over. Our kid needs us.”

She shot him a smirk as she left the kitchen and he grinned as he chased after her.

The rest of the day sped by and soon enough parents appeared to take their tired children home, the house emptying until it was just the six adults and their four children. Lucy and Jean were helping Sam put together the giant spaceship Lego set Lucas had brought them, all three digging through the pieces and exclaiming excitedly when they found the right one. Luke was sitting in Max’s lap, his head laid sleepily against her six-month belly.

“So *how* many?” Lucas asked, eyebrow raised.

“Five, unless for some reason we decide for more,” Dustin said happily, holding his wife’s hand who looked slightly less amused.

“Jesus,” Lucas snorted. El agreed.

“Maybe if you visited more you could help out, taking Jean and Luke out every now and then,” Max retorted but not unkindly. “I definitely wouldn’t mind a little help...”

“Why don’t you get a nanny?”

The conversation quickly went into the troubles of trying to find someone trustworthy, which El could agree would take a while. She trusted very few people with Sam, and it had taken almost a year for her to find a daycare she could drop him off at while she got back into the habit of working. She did still work, finding fulfillment in helping other children as well as caring for her own. Ideally she preferred to leave him with Mike, but he had been busier too, the university assigning him more classes after his doctorate went through. Eventually she’d given in and found a babysitter too, a

student at their alma mater named Jenny who Sam adored and both Mike and El trusted.

Being a parent was hard.

El had days where everything seemed like shit, especially at the beginning. She'd been a mess, still healing from her surgery, dealing with wild hormone surges and a lack of sleep. Some days she wondered how she'd made it through... but she already knew.

Mike.

He stayed her rock, all the promises he'd made about helping her and always being there for her coming true. When she felt like she was ready to pass out or thought she couldn't do it anymore, he was there to guide her to bed or the shower and help her. Feeding Sam when she couldn't, curling up with her at night when she cried for no reason, calming her when the anxiety tried to tell her she would hurt her baby.

Through it all he believed in her and it helped her to believe in herself. And it got easier over the years, through the frustrations of toilet-training and the joys of Sam saying his first word ("T. Rex!"). Over and over again she realized how much she loved her husband and how grateful she was for finding him all those years ago. Without the challenge of her loving him, she might have still believed herself impossible and weak. Unworthy. But he'd been the supernova that had exploded into her life and had inspired her to change her way of thinking. More than once.

Their friends left, Lucas was staying with his parents back in Hawkins but promised to come back tomorrow with Will and Lucy. The house quieted and Mike and El were left alone with their son, who was still sitting on the floor in the middle of the living room putting together his spaceship.

"Did you have fun, Sammy?" Mike asked, sliding down off the couch next to him.

"Yes."

“What was your favorite part?”

“When Uncle Lukey came out,” Sam looked up from his spaceship, smiling and showing off the newest gap in his teeth. “And playing with everyone. And Legos.”

He chattered on a bit, telling them about leading the charge on the invisible shadow monster and how the cake was yummy and every other kid-thing that came to his mind. El felt tired, ridiculously so, and Mike noticed.

“Alright, buddy,” he tried to sound casual, by there was a telltale smile on his face. “Looks like it’s... bedtime!”

“Bedtime!” Sam shrieked excitedly, immediately dropping his Legos onto the floor.

Bedtime, in their household, was the most exciting part of the day. First there was a warm toy-filled bath, then jammies and the tooth brushing song, and finally being tucked in and told a story. El usually did the bathroom portion but when she went to get up, Mike patted her knee and shook his head.

“I’ve got it tonight,” he kissed her head, trying to dismiss her worry. “You go warm up our bed.”

“But—“

He didn’t let her argue. “You did a lot today. I can handle the one kid tonight.”

“You ran around with them all day,” she tried to protest.

“Yeah, but I love that shit and you just tolerate it. I’ve got the bath, you go get ready to sleep. He’ll be out quick tonight, it was a long day,” he argued back.

It was a compelling point and she gave in, nodding as Mike stood and then scooped up Sam, who started laughing and shrieking as his father tossed him over his shoulder. They disappeared down the hallway and El heard the water in the main bathroom turn on. She sat there for a moment longer and then finally stood, feeling her feet

ache and her lower back twinge. When had she become so... old?

The nightly routine went by, going into the master bathroom and taking off her makeup, washing her face and staring at the wrinkles that edged her eyes and lips, poking at them with a sour expression. She was damn near thirty-four and she supposed it was to be expected. Mike had the occasional silver hair around his temples, the beginnings of what she hoped would be a salt and pepper look. His dark hair was one of her favorite things and she just couldn't quite imagine him as a silver fox... but either way it didn't matter. He would have her heart no matter what.

There were giggles from the hallway as Sam was herded to his room, and El looked over her shoulder, sighing happily. She traded her blouse and jeans for one of her soft nightgowns and then quickly brushed her teeth, making her way down the hall to her son's dinosaur covered room.

Will's mural still stood, but the crib had been turned in for a "big boy" bed and the purple and green color scheme a more muted navy and emerald, Sam's choice. Sometimes El wondered what the room would look like if they'd had a girl instead. Would she have liked dinosaurs as much? Would dragons and paladins and hobbits have intrigued her as much they did Jean, or would have wanted the soft pinks and lilacs that Will had painted Lucy's room? Would she have looked more like El, brown hair and hazel eyes? Freckles like her father, and the same adventurous spirit?

The same demons that had tortured her mother howling for her in the night?

El shuddered at the thought, thankful for her one, tiresome, unbelievable child. Sometimes she still couldn't believe how far she'd come, how far her heart had opened. It was proof that her fears had little validity, that she could do whatever she needed, could accomplish goals she thought impossible.

She paused in the doorway. Mike was reading from... Harry Potter? That was new. So far it had just been Tolkien and D&D. He had to run out of material eventually, she supposed. Sam's eyes were drooping, snuggling under his covers, listening and barely stifling a

yawn. El had a flashback to the first time she'd held him, pink and purple and covered in goo, quiet against her chest, his tiny pink mouth gaping as he yawned.

When had he grown so much? Six years old suddenly felt like an eternity. How had time slipped away from her?

Sam's eyes caught her in the doorway and he grinned sleepily, letting out a soft, "Mommy." Mike glanced over his shoulder at her but he didn't stop reading and she walked up behind him, squeezing his shoulder, his hand reaching up to cover hers and squeezing back. His voice filled the room and she stared at her two boys, her heart swelling.

It wasn't the life she had imagined for herself. Any of it. Ever. And even after Mike had come swooping in, she still hadn't pictured it. Her, a mother of an angelic boy who was the perfect echo of her and her love's souls? A fragment of herself wrapped in a tiny human being that loved her with a depth she hadn't known was possible? How could that possibly be something *she* could ever have?

And after it happened that fear had taken over and nearly won, had nearly convinced her to throw the chance away before she could fail. But it hadn't and Mike had helped her realize it was something she could want, something she could have. Sam had been an accident but... he'd helped her realize just how much she could change for the better.

Mike's voice grew quieter and then he tapered off, closing the book and setting it on the table next to the bed. He let out a long, tired sigh and El squeezed his shoulder again, moving past him to get closer to Sam. Leaning down, she pressed a butterfly soft kiss to his forehead, smiling as he murmured in his sleep.

"Good night, baby," she whispered, breathing in his soft smell, warm shampoo and a hint of baby powder. He would always be her baby.

Mike's arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her back, his face resting against the small of her back as he hugged her and she set her hands over his. With a soft sigh, she reached and turned off the lamp, the only light streaming in from the hallway through the door. They

both stood up and carefully crept out of the room, listening to the sound of their son's soft breathing. She gave him one last look before gently closing the door and following her husband down the hallway to their room, closing their door as well.

The room was dark, but she noticed a faint flash from behind the blinds and blinked in confusion before going over and peeking out. Dark clouds full of blue and purple sparks filled the horizon and she remembered the weatherman saying there was a chance for storms that night. Thankfully after the birthday party... what a disaster *that* would have been.

El pushed the soft blue plaid quilt down and slid beneath the cool sheets, sighing happily, hearing the sounds of Mike brushing his teeth in the bathroom. Tomorrow he had to go to the university for some paperwork and to finish totaling the grades for the summer class he'd taught. She'd cleared her schedule for a few days, knowing Will would be stopping by, and she was grateful to have the time to spend with Lucas too.

They'd all come so far, finding what they loved and chasing it. Dustin with his house of technology and kids, Max teaching her children to throw softballs as she watched with a hand on her bulging belly. Will working from his house and making enough to support Lucy and her changing array of siblings, close enough to support his mother—and for his mother to support him. Lucas shooting for the stars and not only making it but almost going further.

And Mike. Her Mike.

He came out of the bathroom just then, turning off the light and yawning, wearing boxers and a comfy white t shirt. His eyes caught hers, watching him, and he cocked an eyebrow, walking to his side of the bed.

“What?” His dark eyes gleamed.

“Nothing... just thinking about how fucking incredible you are,” she sighed. She tried not to swear around Sam but when they were alone in their room, the rules and boundaries all melted away. “Y’know, working a full time job, chasing a horde of children, being the best

storyteller in the whole world...”

He gave her a mistrustful look, eyes narrowing, a smirk twitching his lips. Compliments always made him wary, the sarcastic nature he'd fallen in love with hidden away as she gazed at him fondly. He slid closer to her, rolling onto his stomach and wrapping an arm around her waist.

“Maybe I’m a pretty good husband too?”

“Mm... not bad,” she considered, ignoring how he pulled her closer. “Pretty alright. Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

He pulled her down and she laughed, letting him pin her against the sheets, reaching up for his face and pulling him to kiss her. There was a sudden crack of thunder overhead but she didn't even startle, too lost in the feeling of his lips against hers. She had no fear, not when his arms were around her and he was close enough to feel his heartbeat.

It reminded her of another time, when a thunderstorm pounded the window of her dorm room and she shivered in her wet clothes. When she'd realized for the first time what he could be for her, what he did for her. How he made her want to be better. How much she *loved* him.

His hand snuck lower, teasing her nightgown up her thighs and she giggled against his lips, wondering how he could possibly have the energy after their wild day. But Sam was asleep and they were due for a celebration...

She reached out and turned the light off next to the bed, letting the flashes of lightning light up the room and Mike's face as he loomed over her. Her hand reached up, cupping his jawline, the line of his cheekbone, remembering the first time she'd noticed them beneath neon lights while dancing in a club.

They had come so far.

She rolled onto her side, pushing him over and then staring at him

from her side of the bed and smiling playfully. Another crash of thunder and then she heard the first spatters of rain that quickly turned into a downpour, pounding onto the roof of their house. *Their* house. Their home. The place she felt safe and loved, no longer haunted by the empty halls and cold rooms that were her childhood.

Papa was gone, not even a blip on her radar, and now she had her own family, her friends the one she'd found, and her husband and child, the one she'd made.

Mike's hand trailed across her hip and she kissed him again, feeling the bit of stubble he had yet to shave, sighing happily as he pulled her closer, his shirt pressing against the soft fabric of her nightie.

"Mike," she breathed she pulled back. "Thank you. For never giving up on me."

"Never, El. You're all mine now." His eyes were soft in the pale light. "Forever. You and me always. Until the end."

She almost groaned as he kissed her again, more hungrily, and she let him slide the hem of her nightgown up further, giving in to his hot kisses and—

The door creaked and they shot apart as if they were teenagers getting caught by a disapproving parent instead of a married couple. But the door opening meant only one thing...

"M-Mommy?"

El sat up, quickly shimmying her nightgown back down and throwing Mike a look that said, "This isn't over". He grinned back but sat up too, looking towards the outline of the small boy in the doorway.

"What is it, baby?" She reached for the light.

"I'm scared." The light flicked on and she saw the shadow of fear in her son's eyes.

"Of the storm?"

He nodded, swinging the door back and forth and looking down, like

he was ashamed of his own fears. She scooted over a bit, putting space between her and Mike, patting the spot.

“Do you want to sleep with us tonight? Just until the storm is over?”

He was getting old enough that sometimes the offer was scoffed at. El never chastised him for his fear, but tried not to baby him too much either. It was his choice to stay or to go and she saw him quickly nod. It took two seconds for him to crawl over the bed and wiggle under the covers and El turned the light off again.

“Feel better?” Mike asked gently.

“It’s loud,” offered Sam. “Like monsters fighting.”

“Monsters aren’t real, Sammy. Not the kind I read about.”

“I know. But they’re scary anyways.”

Mike gave El a sheepish look but she knew it wasn’t really his fault. A child’s imagination was sometimes the biggest enemy. Instead she kissed her son’s face and tickled his stomach, smiling as he giggled. It only took a few minutes for him to fall back asleep, and she glanced up at Mike, realizing he had passed out too. Her worn out boys.

Reaching, she smoothed Sam’s hair back from his forehead, noticing again how much he looked like his father, the same midnight hair and moonbeam skin, smattered with tiny freckled stars. Her fingers traced the button nose and he twitched in his sleep, her caress tickly like a feather. He was her tiny miracle, her unexpected love, the most difficult choice she’d ever made and the best one. She couldn’t imagine their life without him, the answer to the equation of their love.

Her eyes drifted up, to the man who had started it all. She stroked his hair too, knowing she could never fully understand the depth of her love for him. Her soulmate, persevering through the worst possible heartbreaks to reach her. Whatever their future held, she didn’t worry about it, knowing she could face it with him beside her.

The fear that had controlled her for so long, that had almost taken her life was nothing more than a shadowy spectre. Her life was

beautiful and full and there was nothing she wanted more than to be right there, in that moment, breathing it all in.

With a smile and a content sigh, she let her eyes flutter shut and drifted off to sleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

that's it. i hope you like mike and el's journey and i hope maybe in some way, you can see your own truths in the ones el found. fear isn't the end. anxiety and depression and mental illness don't mean your life has to be over. you can learn. you can get better. you can.

to everyone who has followed me this far, thank you from the bottom of my heart. it's been hard along the way and i feel terrible for holding back for so long. i'll never deserve any of you and i hope you know you're love by one wacky, old (okay no that old) cat lady who loves stranger things and writing.

if you want to see more from me... i'm afraid i don't know when i'll be posting again yet. i have a lot of unfinished stuff that i'm unhappy with that i'm afraid to look at. but i'm going to try. Don't Make Me Say Goodbye isn't forgotten, but upon closer inspection i've decided i need to take it a different way than i intended and i'm not sure where to begin doing that. but i'm going to try.

thank you all. your comments are all read and loved and appreciated. you guys bring me to tears, honestly, and i love you. i love you.